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THE DESERT GATEWAY



THE VAST OCEAN OF THE SAHARA: THE HOUR OF PRAYER

THE
DESERT GATEWAY
BISKRA AND THEREABOUTS

BY

S. H. LEEDER

56744

Illustrated with 16 Plates from Photographs
by the Author and by A. Bougault



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TO

MY WIFE

WITHOUT WHOSE UNFAILING HELP THIS BOOK

COULD NOT HAVE BEEN WRITTEN

PREFACE

THIS book is an attempt to supply a need I was keenly conscious of during a long visit to North Africa last winter. Falling at once under the fascinating spell of the Arab people, whose life and religion excited in me the greatest interest and curiosity, I, with many other visitors to Biskra, sought almost in vain for answers to the many questions which daily presented themselves. And if books fail, what resource is there? The ordinary tourist, who is making a short visit, finds the Arab himself, when questioned, blank. Indeed, I doubt if there are any people under the sun who can, while preserving a charming courtesy, oppose to the curious such an impenetrable reticence as the Arab is capable of.

I have tried to write the book I should have been glad to find already in existence at the beginning of my stay. My only claims to attempt it are the unusual length of my visit; my extreme good fortune in winning a measure of friendly confidence, by which I got past—if ever so short a distance—the barrier the Arab sets up; and the fact that since my return home I have been able to follow up these advantages by a study of such works as throw light on some of the mysterious problems one could not otherwise have solved.

I trust no one, especially of those who know anything of the depth and subtlety of the Arab mind

and character, will imagine for a moment that I am claiming to have found all, or nearly all, the keys to those secret recesses which have never before yielded to European hands. Of all the keys I did not find more than one—the key of sympathy and respect. And if with that I opened certain chambers of deep human interest, even then I am aware that the light I had was scarcely enough to explore by; and I came away, with the spell unbroken, it is true, but with curiosity only partially abated and interest only partly satisfied. Like Cleopatra, the East makes hungry where most it satisfies. It is this insatiable hunger, I believe, that constitutes its everlasting fascination, and that draws so irresistibly those who have once entertained the illusion that the hunger could ever be appeased.

As to the two chapters on the religion of Islam and the life of its Prophet, I cannot, of course, claim to have added anything to the knowledge of that subject; but I shall count my book to have failed if in the earlier chapters I have not excited in my readers enough interest in the Arab people to carry them on quite naturally to a brief consideration of the religion of the race. This I have written in the light of my own affection for them, and with my own desire to understand the origin of their marvellous history and the forces which have made them what they are. The Arab religion *is* the Arab life. It is in the example and teaching of their Prophet that the inspiration which makes them so different from other men is to be found. Unfortunately, most English writers on this subject have brought to it a strong prejudice. Often, from the point of view of the ardent Christian advocate, it has been sought to demolish the teaching of the Koran; or a

writer like Prof. Margoliouth has written of Mohammet as pretty much of a charlatan, distinguished chiefly by his success in hoodwinking mankind; while at the other extreme we have the glowing rhapsody of Carlyle, as he places him for hero-worship on one of the rare pinnacles he erects for his "great men." It is between these opinions that I seem to find the truth; and my natural Christian bias leads me to believe that to help the millions of Islam no man should contemplate the destruction of the Koran, but should seek rather to supplement it with the Gospel.

I gratefully acknowledge the help of Mr. Percy Hasluck, of Southgate, on many points where a knowledge of Arabic was invaluable. To Dr. Langdon Brown, F.R.C.P., of Harley Street, London, I am indebted for his opinion of the dervish performances, especially valuable as being the outcome of the close observation of an eminent physician. To my numerous Arab friends I owe more than I can say. As the opinions of a cultured Moslem on his religion, the various utterances of Syed Ahmed are deeply interesting.

As Algeria is held by France, it was always interesting to hear the opinion of Frenchmen who, from their official positions, had great opportunities of observing the country and its native people. In very many ways M. François Sicot, of Oran, gave me the advantage of his experience.

I gladly acknowledge indebtedness to Lieut.-Col. Villot's "Mœurs, Coutumes et Institutions des Indigènes de l'Algérie"; to Sale's translation of the Koran and Notes; to the Rev. J. M. Rodwell's translation of the Koran; and to the "Dictionary of Islam," by T. P. Hughes (out of print). Prof. Margoliouth's

"Mohammed and the Rise of Islam" is an invaluable storehouse of facts, antagonistic to what may be called the Carlyle theory of the Prophet.

I have used both the translations of the Koran mentioned, in every case comparing them, and sometimes transplanting a word from one to the other, as the better translation of the Arabic seems sometimes to lie between the two versions. Rodwell's translation is by far the better for the casual reader; the Suras, for one thing, appear in proper historical order, and the poetic form is better preserved by the versification.

In the footnotes "Sura" always means a chapter of the Koran.

S. H. L.

INVERLUNÉ, LANCASTER,
October, 1910.

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THE DESERT GATEWAY

CHAPTER I

FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF BISKRA

It was on a day brilliant with sunshine that we arrived at Biskra in early November, 1909. I suppose the arrival at that little railway station after the long journey from Algiers is always memorable to the "tourist" from the ardour with which he is welcomed by the medley of Arabs, who crowd round the station eager to see if any familiar European face will reappear, or to press their offices, as servant, guide, or porter, upon new-comers; whom they greet with smiles, and cling to with a persistency which to those who do not yet know how to deal with Arab importunities is a little embarrassing, if not vexatious.

It is at the beginning of the winter season, however, that the visitor has a welcome of double enthusiasm. After the long and sweltering summer in the oasis, when work has been almost impossible, and food very scarce, it can be imagined how hope revives in October when the climate becomes agreeable, and the memory of past seasons has taught the Arab lads how much there is to hope for from the daily unloading of the one train, in the early afternoon, which connects the gateway of the great desert

with that wonderful world from which come so many rich and pleasant people.

The station is situated about half a mile from the village, and although it is an attractive idea that one will scorn the 'bus and walk to the hotel, I do not advise this, for whether you elect to take the main road, or to seek the shade of the mimosa avenue through the beautiful public gardens, you cannot escape, in walking, the insistent attentions of the numerous boys and men, each one of whom hopes to become attached to you by reason of much asking. I do not suggest that you will escape altogether by gaining the fastness of the hotel 'bus, but at any rate you will have a breathing time, and will reach your hotel in peace, and can then take the advice of those in authority there as to the necessary services of "guides" or boys.

There is a regular corps of guides licensed by the municipality, who empower them to claim five francs a day for their services; but there are numerous boys of good character (who may not call themselves "guides" for fear of imprisonment) who will work for visitors, carrying photographic apparatus, acting as interpreter, or, if one takes a small apartment—as many do in preference to staying at an hotel—working as domestic servants, expecting from two to three francs a day.

One thing we soon learned—that the hotel proprietors do not allow the Arab boys to work for visitors inside the hotels as personal servants; but each hotel has its own guides, to whom more liberty is allowed than to those who are unattached.

We had decided to stay at the Sahara Hotel, for the reasons that friends of ours had been comfortable there in previous years, and that we wanted

to place ourselves under the care of Madame Jean-Jean, the energetic proprietress, described to us as a typical Frenchwoman, who, with her husband, conducted her hotel in the old-fashioned and personal way, taking a friendly interest in every one of her guests, and herself working incessantly for their comfort and welfare, a course which has the effect of turning an hotel into a home.

At the Sahara we were soon established on terms made more reasonable from the fact that it was our intention to stay till the spring. In Madame, as we expected, we instinctively felt that we had a friend; and if her pointed and vivacious French became a little perplexing to our unaccustomed ears, there was Jules, the excellent head-waiter, who spoke colloquial English, and justly prided himself on having been for some time a butler in an English family, from which experience he had gained a full knowledge of the peculiar needs of English people.

I said the omnibus was only a temporary refuge from the importunate Arabs, and the fact was immediately forced upon us as, from time to time, while we were arranging preliminaries in the hotel, and having tea, we caught sight of a number of keen faces peering through the doors and windows, taking note of our every movement, and anxiously awaiting our appearance in the street.

From what we afterwards learnt of the Arab character, I now know that nothing about us had escaped their sharp eyes, and that already they had formed a fairly correct judgment about our means, our status, and our capacity for being turned to profit by those of them who should be fortunate enough to "bag" us.

As early as this in the season the hunger for

"patrons" is very acute, and to go out of the hotel for the first time is to run the gauntlet in a way which is much modified later on when the hotels are full.

I was anxious not to be on bad terms with the Arab population of Biskra, for I was already deeply interested in the people of Algeria, and had conceived something like a kindly admiration of many of their characteristics.

By the same train as ourselves an Englishman had arrived in Biskra in quite another frame of mind, and as he appeared at the door of the hotel we heard him address the crowd of expectant Arabs in loud tones (as he spoke no French, he seemed to imagine they would have no difficulty in understanding his English if he yelled at them): "Go away! I don't want *any* of you! Go away!" looking very fierce and determined.

And although he was successful in ridding himself, both then and afterwards, as long as he stayed, of all Arab society, we felt that his methods were not for us.

For one thing, the Arab good humour disarmed us, and when we found that they were quick to see a joke, and positively enjoyed being teased so long as one's good nature was not in question, we felt sure that we had discovered both how to enjoy their good will and rid ourselves of their importunities.

We had, moreover, no desire to engage for so long a period a regular guide, as it was our intention to *live* in Biskra for a considerable time rather than to regard the place as a centre for excursions, as the ordinary tourist does who stays for a few days.

Our way was made clearer, too, by the fact that

when we at last appeared in the street we were claimed by a boy who told us his name was Taïb ben Ahmed. He already knew our name; we were friends, he declared, of his patron of last year, and therefore we were his friends.

How he obtained this information we never knew; and, when we afterwards found the marvellous capacity of the Arab for knowing things by a sort of divination, we gave up wondering.

Gradually, for it took quite a week, we shook off every man and boy who followed and tried to claim us, without causing any ill-feeling; excepting Taïb, of course, who established his claim to our interest, proving himself a charming companion and an excellent guide and interpreter, who joined us only when we wished for his services.

I quickly realised the power of the cigarette with the Arab, and, although I could not smoke with them, I discovered what was their favourite "smoke," and always carried in one pocket a supply of cigarettes for the lads and men, and in another pocket a handful of the small nuts, "cocoette" (which a dozen boys sell in the streets), and which all the Arab children delight in.

As the cigarettes were only fifteen sous for a packet of twenty, and the nuts about ten sous for half a pint, it cost little to establish a general feeling of good will, for which I was well rewarded by many pleasant acts of courtesy on the part of the men and much merry chatter from the small fry.

And where will one find such joyous greetings, such pleasant smiles, such light-hearted fun, such an unruffled capacity to make themselves entertaining, as in the Arab boys?

In the early days of our visit I was puzzled to

notice that my cigarettes were not smoked when offered, but put into what answers to the Arab pocket, and the cocoette was stored in the hood of many a small burnous (cloak), the reason being that the great Fast of Ramadhân had begun, and no good Moslem must eat, drink, or smoke from sunrise to sunset during the month. Of this Fast we learned many interesting facts later on.

We can never forget our first ramble through the native village, in and out of the narrow streets, and round the market crowded with Arabs, where during those first days we were often the only Europeans in sight.

We first visited the streets of the cafés, which in the daytime overflowed into the roadway, the customers sitting on the straw mats provided, and revelling in the sunshine, which was no longer (as in the summer) a thing to avoid, but to court, the while they played dominoes and sipped their coffee and peacefully chatted together, as though life had no cares, and such things as work and duty did not exist.

Already at the cafés there was little about us that was not known, and many a friendly smile and greeting met us, with cordial invitation to coffee and play. Here, for instance, was an acquaintance who had seen our arrival at the station, and although he had given up hoping for us as a patron, was quite willing to regard us as a special friend—Ahmed by name, a clever lad, who, although poor, was proud to make us understand that he was "chérif," or noble, being the only person in Biskra who could claim descent from Mohammet.

Here, too, was another Ahmed, "guide to Monsieur Hichens," author of "The Garden of



A NOMAD TENT IN THE DESERT



DOMINOES OUTSIDE A BISKRA CAFÉ

Allah." To the end of our stay he never failed to join us when we met, always with a suggestion of some charming excursion which he wished to arrange for us, interspersed with many reminiscences of the novelist, whose book has made Biskra (which is its Beni-Mora in every detail) famous with many people who, as travellers, would never have heard of it. We were to meet many Arabs who claimed to be immortalised in that work; especially Batouch, the poet, who, since the book was written, had, as we were told, "taken to religion," given up all communication with his many European friends, and retired to a life of contemplation and prayer in his native village some miles away. On his rare appearances in Biskra the rumour quickly spread that he was with his friends in his favourite Arab café. And there one evening we saw him, grown into a mystic, and now a writer of religious poetry only, and qualifying doubtless for the position of a marabout amongst his own people.

The fascination of the Arab market at Biskra is indescribable, for here the teeming life of this gateway of the Sahara, this port of the illimitable ocean of the desert, is centred. Here everything needed by these people is bought and sold, and all the native industries are carried on. The covered market-house is in the centre, and round its four sides is a wide, uneven road, on which is spread every sort of merchandise—from the piles of dates to a collection of second-hand bottles. Round the outer side of the square are arches covering an arcade, and in the depths of these arches are numbers of dark, windowless little shops, in which shoes and other leather goods, silver ornaments, wearing apparel, and other things are made and sold by the squatting natives.

The scene is all purely Eastern—the rich colours of the piles of fruit and vegetables, the brilliant whiteness of the Arab dress, relieved now and then by the bright colours of the burnous of the Arab grandee, or by the blue and red of the uniform of a soldier of the native regiments from the neighbouring barracks, everything aglow in the sunshine, making a picture which never loses its charm.

There is only one thing to remind us that we have not entirely lost touch with the West: under the arcades, on the bit of pavement in front of the shops in which wearing apparel is made and sold, several Arab men are working Singer's sewing-machines, treadling with their bare feet; but even the sight of this modern instrument does not succeed altogether in detaching us from our strange surroundings, for in front of each machine is hung a white cloth on which a large outspread hand in red flannel is sewn, obviously as a charm from evil.

This, Taïb told us, was the hand of Fatima, with which bare statement we had to be content, for we soon discovered that wonderful reticence about native customs and beliefs which keeps the secrets of Arab life sealed to all but the most patient of Europeans, who must stay long enough in this country to win the regard and confidence of the natives before they will return any other answer to one's eager questioning than the gentle "I do not know." Fatima, we knew, was the much-loved daughter of Mohammet, who declared her to be one of the four perfect women; but we had yet to learn why the hand of Fatima was everywhere regarded as a charm, used in every conceivable way, from its impress on the door of the humblest house to the jewelled charm worn round the neck of the rich bride.



A CORNER OF THE MARKET AT BISKRA

To one corner of the market square we were attracted by sounds of music, and there we found a group of five poor men, four of whom were blind, chanting, in the weird minor key which the Arabs love, passages from the Koran, the flutes and the drums (played with the fingers) answering each verse with a sort of refrain. Surrounding the players was a crowd of men, who looked like shepherds from the desert, with many of the small boys of Biskra, all sitting on the ground, of course, as the musicians also were. Many of these boys were already known to us, and they smiled up at us in a friendly way when we dropped a small contribution into the drum of one of the blind men.

Amongst the Arabs, of course, the art of chanting and recitation has always been highly esteemed, and it was most interesting to see the rapt faces of this little audience. We had arrived just as the recitation was ending, and as the chapter from the Koran was finished one of the blind men began a prayer. Instantly all hands were joined as a cup upon the breast, to receive the answer, and as the prayer ended the hands were drawn down the face so that the benefit of the prayer might penetrate the whole being. The crowd then separated.

The meaning of these attitudes at prayer was explained by a courteous Arab standing by, who thanked us for giving a coin to the blind men as though we had given to him.

"We must pay great respect and kindness to the blind," he said, "for our Prophet teaches us to do this in the Holy Koran." And, seeing our deep interest, he went on: "Once Mohammet, whilst in serious discourse with rich and important people, was interrupted by a blind man, Abdallah, who did

not know that he was engaged, and, getting no answer, asked loudly, 'Oh, apostle of God, teach me some part of what God hath taught thee!' But Mohammet, vexed at the interruption, frowned and turned away from him. For this," said our Arab friend solemnly, "the Prophet was admonished by Allah in the Koran, and ever after he showed not only Abdallah, but all blind men, great respect; and all good Moslems must do the same."

This explanation, given with such perfect courtesy and received by us with ready gratitude, led to the beginning of a friendship which was a source of great pleasure and profit all through out stay in the oasis. Ali ben Messoud from that day became our frequent companion, and as he was a gentleman of education a. ' isure, a pious Moslem, deeply learned in the Koran, the religious traditions, and other Arab literature, and in many ways more ready to make clear to us anything in which we were interested than a less cultured and enlightened Moslem would have been, our intercourse came to be one of our greatest pleasures.

We remembered how travellers in Arabia had said that no one who had not studied Islam in its own lands could realise the minuteness and the multiplicity of the rules which are continually observed in all the common acts of daily life. "The position of the thumbs at prayer may convict a man of flagrant heresy."

We have said that Taïb, our guide, was an excellent companion; but it is to Ali, so deeply versed in everything connected with his religion, that we came to be indebted for whatever insight we gained into the life of the Arabs.

And if we were curious about the native life of



ONE SIDE OF THE MARKET AT BISKRA

Africa, Ali was in no way behind us in his desire to understand something of the conditions under which we lived in England, and finding us frank about our own habits, and in no way disposed to treat the strange customs and superstitions of his people with anything short of respect, while he saw that we regarded the observances of his religion with something of reverence, he became unreserved in the information he gave us.

But let us continue our first walk round the market, jostled as we still are by the crowd of Arab men and boys (not a woman is to be seen), who are attracted here by all the many motives which, in every part of the world, draw men to a general mart. This is mostly a retail market, and while some big transactions are going on in the sale of dates and grain, nearly every other vendor of food stuff has arranged his produce in little piles which sell for a sou. Onions, potatoes, red-pepper pods, even small oranges, are ranged in this way; and the butchers, not to be outdone, will sell you a sou's worth of dreadful looking bones.

In one corner we come across the scribes, spectacles on nose, solemnly writing letters for their illiterate clients, and looking very wise as they turn into classical Arabic the sentences dictated to them in the vulgar tongue.

Here at another corner is the Arab book-shop, where we realise how few books are available for the natives. But if books are scarce, so are men who can read them. Those who can enjoy a good story, or who have a taste for history, indulge themselves by assembling in the evening in one of the cafés, where a professional reader regularly sits at his desk and reads the thrilling stories of the Thousand Nights,

or of the great heroes of national history, whose marvellous exploits against their country's enemies rouse the humble hearers to the greatest enthusiasm. The man who can read the Arabic of the classic books is a great person—great in the eyes of his neighbours, for whom he must translate it into the vernacular, which alone they can understand, and particularly great in his own eyes, and anxious that no one should imagine that he belongs to the uneducated, whom he will naïvely describe to you as "the dirt of the road."

The owner of this Biskra book-shop possesses even more patience than those amiable gentlemen who in England are in charge of the railway bookstalls, in the way he submits to the encroachments of the pretended customer—with the difference that here the Arab sits down to read the books and papers which he has not purchased, and has time enough at his disposal to consume the contents of the whole shop. Fortunately for the bookstall owners, Englishmen cannot comfortably sit upon the floor of our railway stations, and I do not imagine there is any suggestion at present to supply them with chairs.

In the second-hand clothes quarter of the market is a busy scene, and here we meet the first European we have seen in this part of the town—a kindly Englishman who has become greatly interested in one of the merry Arab boys, and is showing his good will towards him by rigging him in a second-hand outfit to take the place of the rags which are scarcely decent.

Knowing this man, we are interested in his philanthropic enterprise, and venture to question him on the subject.

"Ah," he answers to our raised brows, which

speak in such plain English sentiments about the judiciousness of his act, repeating the precious wheeze about "pauperising the poor," "Ah, wait until you know these folk a little better, and you will agree with me that nowhere are there a people who so make you feel that you *must* do something for them."

How true this proved to be we often realised later, as we found ourselves—and encountered our compatriots—in this quarter of the market, keenly driving a bargain so that some young Arab scamp might discard his rags and be more warmly and decently clad.

Tucked away in another corner of the market is a little scent shop, to which we were attracted. Here we were invited to enter its cool shade and have a leisurely chat with the owner, who proved himself to be an intelligent man, and regarded our curiosity with good nature and was willing to satisfy it.

It seems that both Arab women and men are very fond of scents, which many of them use after the ablutions preceding their special prayers. In the traditions it is written that the Prophet said, "Oh, men, bathe ye on Fridays, and put some scent on your clothes."

The popular scent is musk, for this was highly esteemed by Mohammet, who believed it to be pleasing to Allah—so much so that Moses, after a long fast in preparation for the high honour of speaking to God, not liking the savour of his own breath, cleaned his teeth with a dentifrice; upon which the angels told him that he had spoiled the scent of musk in his breath, and to restore this he must fast ten days more. Solomon also used the scent of musk on great occasions. The letter mentioned in the Koran, which

he sent to the Queen of Sheba, and which was dropped into her bosom by the lapwing charged with its delivery, was scented by the king with musk.

And amongst the valuable presents sent by the Queen to Solomon was a large quantity of the same scent. In the Koran, too (continued the shopkeeper), among the delights of the righteous, "they shall be given to drink of pure wine sealed, the seal whereof shall be musk," instead of the ordinary seal of clay.*

Our friend Ali, seeing us in the scent shop, joined us, and finding we were discussing scents, told us that the Prophet abhorred any food which gave an offensive odour to the breath, and even the honey of Medina, where he lived, he gave up because it smelt of the strong herbs of the country.

"Just now," Ali continued, "we do not use any scent, as this is Ramadhân. The good Moslem does not eat onions, leeks, or garlic, or such like vegetables, when entering a mosque or joining in public prayers, although they are not forbidden ordinarily" —we had seen a great many onions on sale in the market—"but the Prophet would not allow anyone to enter his presence who had recently eaten such things."

After buying a small bottle of musk, which we asked Ali to accept for use when the month's fast was over, we came out again into the sunny market-place.

Passing us at the moment was a strange figure of a man clad in a single old brown-striped garment, slipping away from his bare shoulders; most noticeable from the fact that his head was uncovered—for to see an Arab man's head bare is the rarest of all

* This we found, on reference to our translation of the Koran, was in Sura lxxxiii.

sights. His naked feet were very dirty, and altogether he was a repulsive figure, for smeared over the crown of his head, which was shaved but for the sort of "pigtail" (dyed red with henna) which many Mohammedans retain, was a patch of filthy mud, some of which had trickled down his bare back.

We turned inquiringly to Ali, whose comment was that the man was a marabout, of a somewhat low type, given (so far as his rather weak intellect allowed) entirely to religion, and that during Ramadhân he abased himself in this way. He carried a tin mug, and his only means of subsistence were the small coins occasionally dropped into it.

We gathered that this term "marabout" was a wide one, applying to the highly educated religious leader on the one hand, and on the other to the wandering idiot whom the Arabs believe to be favoured by Allah, who has withdrawn the poor creature's intelligence to himself, his mind therefore being in heaven, while his grosser part mingles among ordinary mortals. "But," said Ali, "if the man becomes dangerous as a lunatic he is confined, though he is still treated as a special favourite of Heaven."

At this moment there rang out clear and sweet, above the noises of the market, the cry of the muezzin, calling, from the minaret of the mosque close by, the faithful to prayer.* At the first sound our friend Ali stood still, listening with reverence; all the Arabs in the market-place who were walking did the same, and those who were reclining stood up.

"Allahu Akbar!" (God is most great!) This is the moving cry which arrests the attention of all

* Shortly after this the picturesque minaret was pulled down as being unsafe. I hope by this time it has been rebuilt.

men five times every day; this was the sound which I had heard with a thrill as I lay in bed in the darkness of that early morning just before sunrise.

What was the Arab call?

Before Ali left us to enter the mosque he kindly put it into French, which I translate.

"Allah is most great! (repeated four times). I testify that there is no God but God! (twice). I testify that Mohammet is the apostle of God! (twice). Come to prayer! (twice). Come to salvation! (twice). God is most great! (twice). There is no God but God!"

The cry that I had heard in the early morning was slightly varied by the extra words being given, after "Come to salvation,"—"Prayer is better than sleep!"

When Ali rejoined us later on he told us that in the old days Biskra was a rudely fortified town, for the caravans journeying thither across the Sahara were often the prey of those barbarous mountaineers of the Kabyle race who demanded toll, and sometimes robbed the whole caravan; and, when strong enough, would even make a raid upon the inhabitants of the oasis itself.

Since the French occupation these men no longer dare to interfere with the transit of commerce across the Sahara, and Biskra has ceased to fear the incursion of roving bands of robbers from the desert, which at one time kept its inhabitants for ever on the alert, and forced them to make such ramparts as were within their means.

The famous race of Touaregs, who tracked down their prey on the wonderful running camels, and were once such a terror to the traders of Biskra, are not yet quite extinct in the remote parts of the vast

desert. They get over enormous distances in one day, and rush like leaping tigers upon the caravan which they have tracked, perhaps for weeks, with wonderful subtlety.

These caravans, going in quest of gold dust, buffalo skins, ostrich feathers, ivory, and at one time slaves, were rich prey to their enemies.

An Arab proverb says "Poverty has its remedy in the Soudan."

In one of the famous stories in Arab history it is related how Kreddache, who was chief of the Touaregs, was killed in combat by Ben Mansour, leaving a wife, tall and handsome, who promised to marry any one of the tribe who would bring her the head of Mansour. Ould-Biskra, in a terrible expedition which he directed against the tribe of Mansour, killed the murderer. The widow gave herself to Ould-Biskra, but demanded that he should tear the heart out of the enemy and give it to the dogs!

Is it not possible that it is from this Ould-Biskra that this oasis gets its name; that the seven villages have always converged to Biskra market-place, and that it is an etymological error by which the French have come to call one part of the oasis "Vieux Biskra," when the whole of it is really named after the warrior Ould-Biskra, just as the village of Sidi Okba is named after its own hero?

We took leave of Ali with an assurance that he would earn our sincere gratitude if he would help us in future days to satisfy, if only in part, the deep interest and curiosity which had already been aroused in our minds by our surroundings.

Could we ever, my wife and I asked each other, get answers to all the questions which our highly stimulating experiences were arousing in our minds?

We already felt that we should be more than happy among these primitive people, who seemed ready to give us welcome and admit us to their light-hearted companionship, in return for which we could not but feel that we wanted to contribute something to their happiness.

The chief glory of Biskra is the splendid hour of sunset, when the vast circle of mountains, broken only by the narrow opening to the south towards the illimitable sea of the Sahara, is glorified with such beauty as one could never have imagined, from what one has previously known, in northern latitudes, of colour.

There was scarcely a day on which this "vision splendid" failed us, and always the late afternoon found us either on the hill of the fort on the Beni Mora road, or walking by the river bed.

The turret of the Hôtel Royale was built to command this wonderful scene, and by the kindness of the owners no objection is taken to its ascent by visitors who are not staying in the hotel.

Those who think, as we did, that the beauty of this scene, in which the oasis seems for a time to be caught up into the atmosphere of a celestial world, is best enjoyed in solitude and away from the comments of men (some of whom, though colour-blind, are so well-bred that even to a sunset they think they must do the "civil thing") will choose the wider platform.*

I shall never forget the sight which on that first

* I am reminded of a woman of true Lancashire origin who, in Egypt, when asked by friends of mine to comment on the beauties of a sunset which is, I believe, thought to be one of the unique glories of the world, said, with a delicious deliberation, "Well, it's no better than I've seen at Southpört!"

evening burst upon our view as we left the shade of the gardens and turned down the road by the Oasis Hotel.

Still in shadow ourselves, we looked up towards the narrow opening of the road on to the farther bank of the river and the mountains beyond. There the whole scene was bathed in an intense glow of pearly mauve—intense and yet soft and tender—of such unexpected beauty as almost to take away our breath.

The illumination now caught the overhanging bank of the river, then it lighted with soft precision the long line of the dwellings of the nomad colony settled on the other side of the river (which in ordinary daylight is only just visible), until each tent seemed like a little pavilion of beauty set on a terrace of gold. In the intense glow we could plainly see the white figures of Arabs moving about at their evening tasks, chiefly of bringing in the sheep and goats and tethering the cattle.

Then away up to the mountains the eye travelled, to feast on the ethereal beauty, as the colours glowed and died on the different hills, with effects that changed with every moment as the sun sank lower in the west.

In a few seconds the edge of the river bank was left to darkness; then the great circle of light, so vivid as to have almost as clear an edge as the shaft from a searchlight lantern, crept away from the nomad tents, leaving them in turn to darkness, slowly withdrawing across the plain, up the mountain sides, until the last hill, which stands as a mighty sentinel at the gateway of the desert, stood alone with one or two of the higher peaks in the light.

Still the golden line crept on, until at last the

whole range was deserted by the great God of Light, who left it clothed in its plain brown and yellow robes, which lacked the decoration of even a single tree.

Usually the beauty of the sunset fades quickly, and is followed by complete darkness, with scarcely any twilight. Now and then, however, there lingers a deep red glow on the western horizon; above this red there will be a broad band of vivid green, while the great vault of heaven is of purest blue. One memorable night the intensity of this vision of heavenly colour was increased by the brightness of the evening star, when Venus twinkled out into the centre of the western glow, to be followed by all the sparkling lights of heaven, which in the southern sky have a beauty unknown to those who never leave the lands encircled by the northern mists.

CHAPTER II

A LITTLE PAGEANT OF EASTERN LIFE, AS SEEN IN THE GARDENS AT BISKRA

MANY friends have imagined that our life at Biskra for a whole winter must have been dull, and when we have replied that we never had a dull moment, they have asked us to tell them what we found to do. This is no easy thing to put into words which can be understood by those who have no experience of primitive life in a land of almost unbroken sunshine, and with a people like the Arabs.

To the bustling Englishman, who, to be happy, must always be *doing*, life in an oasis would "bore him to death" after the first few days; indeed, we saw the hasty departure of several people of this class during the winter, who went back to the modern delights of Algiers because in Biskra they could not find a single thing of interest to "do."

But over others something of the Arab spirit and philosophy comes, and the claims of that vigorous, intensive, exacting life to which they have been accustomed at home gives way to the quiet, dreamy enjoyment of mere existence. It is as though they had smoked the pipe of kief, and had reached that state in which they had attained the passing enjoyment of mere sense, the pleasant languor, the dreamy tranquillity, the airy castle-building which, Burton said, takes the place in the East of the energetic, passionate life of Europe.

These Arab people truly regard work as *travail*, and never, any of them, let its claims entirely possess them. Out of the easy contentment which they cultivate, and which their religion encourages, and with the childlike impressibility of nature and exquisite sensibility of nerve which they possess, they find full happiness in quiet and contemplation.

It is a very true observation that in the East man wants little but rest and shade; he is perfectly happy smoking a pipe or drinking a cup of coffee. Under these conditions, what the Arab hates most is disturbance of mind; even conversation must be kept out of troublesome channels, and he will abruptly turn from a serious subject when it begins to weigh upon his spirit. The displeasures of memory, the vexations of thought, any domineering pressure of obligation or possible duty, these are things he avoids as a curse.

"Is it true," I was often asked by Arab friends, "that in England there are gentlemen who have money in the bank and who still work every day?"

"Yes, there are millions who do this in Europe."

"Sir, it seems impossible. What is the good of money in the bank if your work is still your master?"

A question which I found it difficult to answer.

It is obvious, if one can put oneself in some degree in tune with this philosophy of life, and establish a pleasant relationship with its followers, that here is the perfect cure for those who are worn with the over-strenuous conditions of life at home, and harassed by its pressing cares, which for a time they are trying to escape, in the hope, if possible, of finding healing in the "pipe of kief." To such as are wanting a complete rest, and are willing to leave behind them their old habits of civilised activity,

and to adjust their minds to a new outlook upon life, there is no spot so suitable as this.

But in my own case, though I was in search of rest and change, I was not seeking absolute idleness or stagnation of mind. Like Hagar, I sought, in the region of the mind—

> "The happy mean, of wealth and want between—
> Enough of want to stimulate my mind,
> Enough of wealth to keep my mind serene."

I have said that during our long stay we never had a dull moment. We even arranged to have our breakfast at a table in one of the windows of the hotel overlooking the road, so that we might lose nothing of the ceaseless pageant passing along the road, which never failed to interest us. Arabs and negroes of all sorts were continually going to and fro, while many of the guides and boys sat in the gardens, in view of the hotel doors, so that none of the visitors' movements should escape them.

It is the custom of the Frenchwomen of Biskra to hire the small Arab boys of the place in the morning to carry the great open-mouthed baskets, made of plaited palm leaves, in which they gather from the different provision stalls in the market their stores for the day. These boys, with the smaller fry, are full to the brim of the joy of living, and as they dance and twirl along the road, with bare feet, and with their one garment of brilliant hue, from brightest pink to deepest yellow, flashing in and out, now into the shade of the gardens, now out again into the sunshine of the road, they are the embodiment of gaiety and grace.

Breakfast over, we cross the road, where room is made for us by Arab friends on the garden seats.

One point struck me from the first: these Arab men and boys never rose from their seat when we approached, as an English boy, with equal manners in other respects, would have done. Even Taïb, whose manners were in every way those of a gentleman, would greet both my wife and me without getting up. By a casual question put to Ali, we discovered that it is held to be very overbearing in a man to require others, however lowly, to rise for him. It is said that Mohammet's disciples never rose when he entered a room, as they knew he disliked an act which would seem to suggest arrogance on his part.

Soon we are surrounded by a small crowd of chattering boys. Two or three of them will be boot-blacks, and these will sit on their boxes quite close to us; others will be errand boys, who will stop on the way to chat with the new "tourists," squatting at our feet the while. There is the greatest ease of manner and good feeling between us all, and much conversation on many different subjects; on my side I tell them of the wonders of London and Paris, on theirs they describe to me, with gayest humour, the merits—and otherwise—of the tourists of previous seasons, and produce from the recesses of their scanty garments many picture-postcards which "patrons" have sent them from different Continental cities.

It is astonishing to find what conversational powers some of these young scamps possess and of what picturesque language they are capable. I was describing how in London the hotels rose floor above floor (two stories is the most Biskra boasts of), and how people are carried to the top floors in lifts. Then, again, how we have railways running at a



"Un sou, M'sieur?"

A BEAUTIFUL LITTLE BEGGAR-GIRL

great depth from the surface of the ground, the trains also being reached by lifts.

A recitation of all these wonders left them almost speechless with astonishment, when Sassi, an imp of ten years, being the first to find his tongue, said, "Monsieur, it is wonderful; for when one looks at the map of the world, England appears like a little French racecourse in the middle of the desert, and yet it is *très riche et très grande.*"

These Arab boys are very proud of the few words of English they have picked up, and which they repeat very often, and there is much laughter over their attempts to learn from me one or two new sentences, such as "May I clean your boots, sir?" to help them in their *travail*, of which they speak much, but accomplish little. I am convinced, however, that they are not all idle; indeed, we afterwards knew several lads who worked hard and regularly, especially one who was engaged by a French baker, and always worked all night; several as railway porters, and others as domestic servants to the French residents. In a small place like this there is not enough work to go round, and in the summer the heat is terrible and must leave its impression on their habits; and, of course, there is always the Arab view that work, as such, is a curse.

An Englishman who came to Biskra later in the season told me an anecdote of the boy whom he employed, which illustrates this idea of work. Messoud was in luck's way this season, for in addition to his regular employment with a bean-seller in the market, my friend, who was studying the language, engaged him for his off-time to talk Arabic with him, paying him a regular sum each day. As the lad did not want the money for his immediate needs, it was

banked for him with one of the shopkeepers in whom he had confidence, and as the days went on he began to consider himself quite a rich person.

"And what will you do with this money," my friend inquired, "when I am gone?"

His answer puts the Arab philosophy into a nut-shell.

"I shall leave it with the shopkeeper until next June, when the hot weather begins. Then I shall give notice to the bean-seller to leave him; I shall take my money, pack up my things, and go by train to Setif. There in the mountains (it is several thousand feet above the sea level) I shall *walk about* for three months. I have many friends there, and I shall meet them, drink coffee with them, and talk much with them. I shall stay with my sister, who lives there, and to make sure that I shall be welcome, I shall buy for her on the day that I arrive a sack of corn and other provisions."

"But," commented my friend, "why not save your money, add more to it, and one day buy a palm garden?"

"No!" was the answer, "for I might by staying a whole summer in Biskra get a *maladie* and die, and then I should lose my money, or my garden, and not have had the good time!"

To have money in the bank, and yet to work every day, that is a foolishness which must be left to people as stupid as the English. "What is the use of life if you do not have a good time?"

I have a little joke with these boy friends, that I am to be paid one franc for each lesson in English, and when I remind them of this they instantly, with laughing eyes and gleaming teeth, hand over to me their little purses. They all love mimicry, and laugh

delightedly when I imitate them to any new friend who may join us. I never met an Arab who did not appreciate a joke, even when against himself. When I became more familiar with them they would shake hands as a sign of gratitude if I made them laugh, as this is their habit amongst themselves.

With all their fun there is no rowdiness, and even in laughter they think restraint is proper, and that any loudness is the sign of a fool. I noticed that no Arab ever whistled, and found that it is generally held to be unlawful to the pious, because of the verse in the Koran: "And their prayer (the unbelievers) at the House of God is no other than whistling through the fingers and clapping of the hands." It was believed that some of the infidels of the Prophet's day at Medina used to whistle on purpose to disturb him at his prayers, pretending to be at prayer also themselves.

There was one exception in the matter of rowdiness. Master Sassi, whose facility in poetic expression I have already mentioned, began to exceed the bounds of good-natured fun, and his naughtiness attracted the eagle eye of Madame Jean-Jean. He was warned once or twice, and then one day summary punishment descended upon him. In the midst of his antics Madame appeared at the hotel door, addressed one or two forceful observations to us on such conduct—*c'est méchant*—and promptly ordered a big boy to haul the small culprit off to the police station; where, on Madame's word alone, he was whipped and detained for some hours.

The transformation was wonderful. Sassi's politeness, especially to me (for it was to me that he was showing rudeness on that fatal morning), was superb, and his bows, fez in hand, almost to the ground,

were drollness itself. His "*Bon jour,*" and "How are you?" when we met, and his profuse "*Bon appétit,*" "*Bonne couche,*" whenever he saw us going into the hotel, were a daily delight.

When Sassi saw dust on my boots, I had much ado to keep him from brushing them with his burnous, and as a further mark of devotion he offered for four sous to procure me henna and show me how to stain the nails of my right hand and both the hands of my wife. In every way a reformed character, he chattered to us incessantly in French, and for mischief we had now nothing but innocent drollery.

One has read much of the repugnance and contempt of Mohammedans for Europeans. Burton says that no one who has not lived with them disguised, as he did, can have any conception of its extent, so well is the feeling veiled under the garb of innate politeness, and so great is their reserve when conversing with strangers.

I can only say that in my experience this is exaggerated. I think the Mohammedan is often inexpressibly shocked by what is to him our loudness and want of reserve, and the self-assurance of the ordinary European, who takes it for granted that these "barbarians" will recognise him at once as a much superior being whose patronage of them will be gratifying. The casual tourist never seems to get any conception of the depth of pride there is in the Arab nature, or that his gentleness is not feebleness, but the result of a universal code of deportment and good manners.

In the bearing of men towards each other we have much to learn from the Arabs, and if travellers would approach them remembering this, they would

be met, not with reserve or contempt, but with a charming friendliness and a courtly frankness which would not fail to add to the pleasure of their stay.

Twice at the beginning of my stay in Biskra I met with deep resentment through an ignorant act. The first time, wishing to attract the attention of my guide when he was some distance away, I *whistled* to him. I shall not forget the pained and horrified look he turned upon me, and the fixedness with which he declined to respond to my call.

One day later, when one of my numerous juvenile friends offered me his hand—as all Arabs constantly do—and I shook it with my *left* hand, I was again met with the same sort of resentment. Snatching his hand away the boy said, "You should not give me your left hand!"

I was worried about this until I found from my friend Ali that it is the rule to honour the right hand above the left, to use the right hand alone for all honourable purposes, and the left for actions which, though necessary, are deemed unclean. Knowing this, I took the first opportunity to apologise to the boy for what, quite unintentionally, must have been an insult.

The habit of shaking hands is unfailing, and no thought of social distinction is in any way a limit to it. It is enjoined in the traditions and founded upon the Prophet's example, for he is reported to have said, "There are no two Moslems who meet and shake hands but their sins will be forgiven them before they part."

To some English visitors the habit, especially as practised by the small boys, is vexatious and wanting in respect, but on the part of the Arab it is intended as a sign of confidence and friendliness.

Another act so common with us, and which is abhorrent to the Arab, is *yawning*. I detected that a yawn on my part was like a douche of cold water on our intercourse, while on the other hand a *sneeze* seemed to have instant approval. I found that, as a sacred duty, they always said after sneezing, "God be praised!" the reason being that Mohammet told them "God loves sneezing and hates yawning." As for yawning, it is of the devil. "Therefore, if any of you yawn, let him suppress it as much as possible. If he cannot stop it, let him put the back of his left hand upon his mouth, for verily when anyone yawns and opens his mouth the devil laughs."

It is a curious thing that although it is forbidden in the Koran to "call one another by nicknames,"* the Arabs are much given to the habit. There was one droll character in our pageant, a lad named Achmed—a sad rogue, I fear, but a most amusing one. Sharper even than the average youth (and for observation and intuition the dullest Arab is an astonishment to the European), Achmed had not only picked up a good many English and German words, in addition to fluent French, but he was able to mimic the personal eccentricities of most of us, and imitate us in voice and style of address. He was a born flatterer, as he was a genius at begging and in the art of ingratiating himself with anyone likely to serve him. He was one day trying to cozen a half-franc out of my pocket. "French," he said, "*no* good! Germans, *so, so!* Englesh, *very* good!" He then gave me the drollest imitation of the way in which the French and German tourists resisted his wiles, ending with a very flattering picture of the easy and courteous way in which an English gentleman would

* Sura xlix, 11.

accede to his requests. Finding I was not to be drawn, he fell to self-pity; "*Poor* Achmed! no *thé*, no *café*, no *kous-kous;* no *père*, no *mère*, no *couche!*" He was so comical in his woebegoneness that he got my half-franc; but afterwards, to the great delight of his friends, in which he himself shared, he became stamped with the name of "*Poor* Achmed!" and my little recitation of his woes—most of which, by the way, were imaginary—always caused amusement.

Burton, who was himself nicknamed "father of mustachios," thought that this habit is the effect of acute observation and the want of variety in proper names. One of his acquaintances appeared not to like having been called the "father of a nose." But there is nothing disrespectful in these allusions, certainly nothing opprobrious. Amongst these people you must be father of something, and it is better to be father of a feature than of a cooking-pot!

The deportment of the Arabs has always called forth the admiration of Europeans. I think this dignity is more than the mere natural bearing of a proud people, which it is generally thought to be; it is the outcome of much of the teaching of their religion.

I had many talks with Ali as we sat in the gardens on this subject. Often, as we talked, a fine old Arab gentleman passed and re-passed us, a benign and gentle figure, always engaged in telling the beads of a rosary * which he carried in his right hand.

* The history of the rosary is interesting. It is thought that the Moslem borrowed it from the Buddhist; and that the Crusaders borrowed it from their Mohammedan opponents, and introduced it for purposes of prayer into Christendom, as it was not known in the Roman Church until 1596.

"He has given up the world," remarked Ali, "and now spends all his time in the worship of God. His rosary consists of a hundred beads, and he recites with it the ninety-nine 'most excellent titles of God'* which are to be found in the Koran, together with the essential name of 'Allah.'"

The Prophet was once asked, "O Prophet of God, the rules of Islam are many, tell me one thing by which I may gain sure reward." "Let thy tongue be always moist in the remembrance of God!" was the reply. From this the recitation of the titles grew.

I remark on the dignity of the old man's bearing, and Ali's reply is significant.

"No pious Moslem would be different from that. In boyhood he is taught that he must not hurry as he walks, for that is a sign of levity; neither must he be unreasonably halting, for that would betray dullness. He must not stalk like the overbearing. In spitting or blowing the nose, even, he must be careful that no one sees or hears him; and he must on no account eat anything in an open place, lest a poor hungry person see him and be pained. In all things he should so behave as not to incommode or disgust others. Our Prophet taught that 'modesty is a branch of faith.' The Koran says, 'The servants of the Merciful are those who walk meekly on the earth, and, when the ignorant speak to them, answer "Peace!"'

"Should it *not* give strength and dignity to a man's bearing to know, as the Moslem does, that he is attended each day by his two recording angels, 'whom Allah hath appointed to write down your

* Sura vii, 179.

actions; who know that which ye do,'" * said Ali. "The angel on the right hand records the good deeds, and that on the left the evil. These angels are changed every day, and their presence is very real to us; so much so that Mohammet enjoined that if we are obliged to spit, it must not be in front or to the right hand, but to the left. Before we begin our prayers we salute the recording angels by a slight turn of the head towards each shoulder."

The next morning Ali handed me a beautifully written slip of paper with three verses from the Koran written on it in Arabic. We referred to them in my copy, and they were as follows:

> "Observe prayer, and enjoin the right and forbid the wrong, and be patient under whatever shall betide thee; for this is a bounden duty.
>
> "And distort not thy face at men; nor walk thou loftily on the earth; for God loveth no arrogant, vain-glorious one.
>
> "But let thy pace be middling; and lower thy voice; for the least pleasing of voices is surely the voice of asses." †

"That," said Ali, "my father found for me when I told him of your remarks about our—*deportment*, do you call it? The Koran, you see, is our book of manners as well as our Bible."

I now knew why the Arab boys always joked me about my "English march," when, to keep myself warm after sunset, I tramped up and down in a way which only their politeness kept them from describing as arrogant. One small friend told me that I walked "like a fantasia"! And I was no longer puzzled as to why even the poorest of boys would

* Sura lxxxii. † Sura xxxi, 16, 17, 18.

retire into the most private part of the gardens to hide himself while he ate the *gâteau* to which I had treated him.

Such is the Arab modesty of conduct that gentlemen of Ali's standing always contrive to be very seldom seen in the more public roads or places of resort. If it was necessary for Ali to move about in the town more than usual, he would show the greatest ingenuity in doing it in such a way as to escape observation, a very difficult thing to accomplish when there are Arab eyes about!

One morning, after I had been in Biskra about a month, when I made my appearance one of the small boys outside the hotel remarked, "Ah, monsieur has on a new pair of boots. That makes *three* pairs, one nearly new, one with a stitch gone, and this new pair"! These boots were all identically of the same make, and my wife did not know the difference between them!

And another morning, when I went down the side street to fasten the shutter of my bedroom window which was rattling in the wind, and could not for the moment determine which was *my* window, an Arab boy whom I had never seen before said, "Do you look for the window of your chamber, monsieur? This is it!"

To speak in the same chapter of Arab meekness and of Arab pride may seem a contradiction, but it is certain that in their remarkable character the two things are reconciled. "Ye are the best nation that hath been raised up to mankind," says the Koran;* and every Mohammedan fervently applies this to himself. In another Sura it is written, "Walk not proudly in the land, for thou canst not cleave the

* Sura iii, 106.

earth nor equal the mountains." * While amongst the strongest sayings of the Prophet (recorded of his private conversation) is that in which he swears by Allah that his followers must desist from boasting of their forefathers. "Mankind are all the sons of Adam, and Adam was of the earth."

Our boy Taïb was a good instance of this combination of gentleness and pride. Ordinarily his placidity was unruffled by the slightest sign of self-assertion, but when an English clergyman suggested to him that he would like him to become a Christian, the Moslem pride burst forth in a fierce flame. "Does he know," he said to me in a voice trembling with indignation, "that I am a Mussulman?"

These Arab men are physically a fine race, with incontestable qualities. As a rule they are slender—they make great fun of a man who is portly—and, thanks to their clothing, which does not fetter their movements, and especially to the baboosh, which do not cramp their feet, their movements are very graceful. They walk with a mien which kings might copy, and their bodies acquire a purity of line which the sculptor might rejoice in.

Too much has been made of the haughty and imperturbable gravity of their habitual expression. They certainly give one such an impression at first, but it is always tempered on acquaintance by their good nature and childlike love of the humorous and the gay. Dignity they do cultivate with deliberate study, and they have a steady faith in God which gives them calm; but I never found an Arab, however old and reverend, who did not respond heartily to a joke.

I was sitting in the gardens one day surrounded

* Sura xvii, 39.

by my native boy friends when one of them pointed out to me an approaching Arab figure and jokingly told me to say to him in Arabic as he passed, "Naal deen Waragethum." *

The result, the boys all eagerly told me, would be that the man would *cut my throat!* Of course I carefully repeated the fatal sentence, and, to the delight of my companions, made as if I meant to challenge the dour-looking creature with it; equally of course, while I observed him closely, I avoided provocation of a foe of whose attributes I was entirely ignorant.

This man, so different in type from the ordinary Arab, was thick-set and short, rather high and round-shouldered, and decidedly bow-legged, so that he lacked the dignity of carriage which is so remarkable in the Arabs as a race, as much as he lacked their geniality and handsomeness of countenance. He was a Mozabite, one of the sects of Islam which are regarded with traditional hatred by all others. There are many Mozabites in Biskra, as in all the other towns of Northern Africa. And so clear is the type that, having seen this one man, in his dirty gandoura, to which his round shoulders gave an ugly twist in front, his untidy turban wound carelessly round the back of his head, and with his slipshod gait, there was never any difficulty again in identifying one of the tribe.

It was with great interest that we afterwards studied these Mozabites, for they were in almost every characteristic the opposite of our Arab friends, excelling them in industry and commercial skill and stability, while lacking in every way their charm of

* "Curse the religion of your first ancestor," the man who murdered Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law, in the mosque at Bagdad.

manner, their cleanliness, and their sociability. Never during the whole winter did I once get speech with a Mozabite—man or boy.

From an English friend, who spoke Arabic, and had ventured to ask one of them a question on the subject of their language (which also differs from ordinary Arabic), I learnt that such is their pride that, although he went humbly and addressed his man as "Oh, my lord!" he got a bare answer, given with the utmost condescension.

One of my photographs of the market-place is taken from the roof of an Arab café. A Mozabite occupies a shop with a flat roof near by, from which a much better picture could be taken, but although I tried every sort of wile, and suggested a variety of rewards (in which several photographers would have combined to swell the value), I and my Arab messengers were met with the flattest of refusals; and in the end it was made clear to us that the offer of a bribe, no matter of what value, would not suffice to get a European, or an Arab of another tribe, through the house of a Mozabite, by which way alone the roof could be reached.

These Mozabites come from M'zab, a colony of seven adjoining oases in the desert, about 110 miles from Algiers, and about 400 miles from Laghouat, to the south. The population of M'zab is only 25,000, so that it is easy to see how these people, in proudly declining all social intercourse with anyone born of another tribe, have produced such a very pronounced type that even the youngest boy of them is recognisable at a glance.

Little children of this race we never saw, for so strict is the sect in the barrier which it sets up to preserve itself from any intercourse—except in

trading—with those outside, that no Mozabite may bring his wife, or any child under ten years old, away from his own country; nor may he, on any ground whatever, marry in any other place.

The men leave M'zab to engage in all kinds of commerce, and their industry and skill make them the most successful bankers, butchers, grocers, drapers, and coal dealers in all the towns as far south from Algiers as Biskra. They are joined by their boys when they have reached the age limit. When they have gained a competency, they return to their wives and small children in M'zab, and another member of the family comes out to succeed them.

The Mozabites form a well-organised commercial society, or freemasonry, by which they help each other, in all the towns of Algeria, to success in trade.

They are very strictly governed by a religious body called the Assembly. If a Mozabite is convicted of drinking wine, or coffee, or of smoking, or of frequenting houses of ill-fame, corporal punishment is inflicted upon him by his brethren, at a time and place appointed by them, in fixing which they take care to dodge the interference of the French authorities. In the presence of the French they affect manners full of respect, but in reality the Mozabite is dominated by a spirit of caste so strict that he detests and misunderstands all other races. In this they share in common with the Israelites—with whom they have many affinities—the Oriental pride which makes them consider themselves superior to the rest of mankind. They follow the precepts of the assassin of Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet, and hence the traditional hatred for them of the ordinary Arabs.

On the road to Old Biskra, on the right-hand side, is a large enclosure, hidden inside a high

wall, having apparently no entrance gate. For a long time we were puzzled, there being no date trees growing in it, as to what it could be. Then Ali informed us that it was the Mozabite cemetery. Before it was built—on compulsion of the French authorities—these people followed their ancient practice of never burying any member of their tribe, no matter where he died, in any place outside their own country.

In Biskra this custom, combined with their great parsimony, led to grave scandals, for when a man died it was thought to be far too costly to send his remains specially to M'zab, and so the body was preserved in brine until a caravan happened to be going on general business. Ali declared (and every Arab in Biskra believes it) that at the time the French authorities took action there was a corpse in the back premises of almost every Mozabite shop in Biskra!

Under compulsion they bought a plot of ground for a cemetery, and surrounded it with the highest wall in the town, so as effectually to screen the funeral ceremonies and the graves from the observation of infidel eyes. The entrance doors were at first made in the wall on the Old Biskra road. Stone-throwing with the Arabs is a token of hate; and every man and boy who passed these doors threw a stone at them, until, fearing that they would be broken entirely down, the Mozabites built up the opening and made an entrance on the other side of the cemetery, where it is entirely out of sight of the passers-by.

But although the men are so hated, in the matter of business the Arabs rely upon their integrity; even to the extent of one of the boys of whom I have

previously spoken asking a Mozabite shopkeeper to take care of his savings during the season, until he was ready to go to Setif "to walk about for three months." They run successfully a number of banks in the great commercial centres.

Among the small crowd of youngsters who often surrounded us in the gardens was a poor unfortunate boy named Smaïn, who, with more or less diligence, sought work as a boot-black. He looked pale and underfed, and because he was less bright and contented-looking than the other young scamps, he attracted the sympathetic notice of a charming girl visitor from Canada, whom he addressed as "Miss May," and to whom he became very attached. Day by day during Miss May's visit he gradually shed all his hideous ill-fitting European clothes and a pair of awful down-at-heel boots (evidently long before cast off by a French dandy), until he became completely transformed by the nice white Arab robes and the comfortable leather baboosh into quite a pleasant-looking Arab boy.

And during the season we saw many fostering acts of kindness of this sort on the part of visitors, giving continual evidence of the assertion that nowhere as here do you find people whom you feel that you must do something to help.

I watched an episode grow out of the kind interest of Miss May and her friends in these boys which amused me. These young ladies would often sit in the gardens and talk to our little crowd of acquaintances, and to amuse them would introduce what we call "parlour games," mostly played with a pencil and paper.

On this particular morning there was an unusually numerous gathering, and one of the young

ladies bethought her of a game, once popular at home, in which the different players in turn take a pencil and, with eyes shut, attempt to make an outline drawing of an animal. To show these boys what she meant, she took the pencil first and, tightly shutting her eyes, proceeded to draw.

Whether it was a tribute to her skill, or to Arab intuition, I don't know, but almost at once the boys detected that she was drawing the outline of a pig. I saw signs of the feeling of absolute disgust steal over them; and then, without a single word, they all slipped away through the trees. With delight I watched the artist add the squiggle which meant a tail, and then open her eyes—to find all her companions vanished. In blank astonishment she turned to me, and, having a keen sense of humour, we laughed together over the explanation, of which she had no previous idea. Pig in any form is, of course, held in great abhorrence by all Moslems, being forbidden in the Koran, a fact of which I had seen much evidence, but I did not know the feeling was so deep as to have the power to disperse a number of veritable "street Arabs" at the mere suggestion of the drawing of a *cochon* in fun.

A boy friend, to whom we became greatly attached, was Bendriss, a sturdy lad of fifteen, whom we often saw as he went backwards and forwards to the French school. Many were the pranks he played upon me, a favourite amusement of his being to track me stealthily in the gardens like a Red Indian, taking me by surprise. Like many Arab boys, he was very amusing and interesting in conversation. More even than most, he made expressive use of his hands, knowing and using the whole language of the hands by which the Arabs often convey a great deal of

meaning without speaking a word. In sorrow and regret the palms of the hands are turned downwards. To express dissent in every form they wave the raised forefinger of the right hand. To dismiss a subject, and to express the finish of anything, they extend each hand in turn and sharply draw over it the other palm.

One day Bendriss cleverly showed us how with his fez he could imitate the head-dress of each of the regiments of soldiers who had been stationed at Biskra.

Although there is among these people hardly anything of what we call class distinction, we were told with great *empressement* many times, when our Arab friends met us with Bendriss, that he was of a most noble family, and that his father was *très riche*, a fact in which they all seemed to take great pride. On the boy's part there was not the slightest consciousness of this, and it certainly never made the least difference in his dealing with other boys. And often this merry young scamp would drop all his playfulness, and with serious face lead a poor old blind Arab man (of whom there were too many) up to me to ask me if I would not like to give him a sou!

Bendriss lodged in Biskra during the school term, his home being at El Outaya, twenty miles or so up the railway. One day I met him looking very spry in what one might call his second-best clothes. I knew it was not holiday time, so I questioned him.

"What is the meaning of this?"

"Oh! I've got a *congé*, a holiday! By the two o'clock train I am going home for two days. Oranges in my father's garden"—he enumerated the delights in store—"kous-kous made by my mother, horses to ride, no work to do!" To express his pleasure he



BENDRISS, THE SCHOOL-BOY SON OF A RICH ARAB



AN ARAB FRIEND IN GALA ATTIRE

could only put all the fingers and thumb of his right hand together and wave them up and down, saying "*Beaucoup! beaucoup!*"

I pretended to be greatly shocked; said he had not long been back from his Christmas holiday, and that it was a scandal that he had so soon got a *congé* again.

"Sir," he replied, with a gravity that was comical, "it is bad to work too much. If you do not have enough holiday"—here he shook in every limb in imitation of senile decay—"you will have a palsy!"

We parted with the inevitable handshake, both laughing heartily. I have often wondered since how an Arab boy of fifteen came to know even the name of a disease which was the result of overwork.

Bendriss writes to us sometimes, in good French. He is to go on from the Biskra school to the university at Constantine, and then he wants to enter the French army as an officer of Spahis, a native regiment. He is determined to visit London, and as English is taught at the university (we afterwards had proof of how well it is taught by meeting Arabs educated there), he was determined to learn it. We sent him an English dictionary, and in reply he said he hoped when we returned to Biskra (and we must go again next year) we should find that he could talk in our own language to his *bon camarade*.

CHAPTER III

FAST, FEAST, AND A GREAT PRAYER

We had only been in Biskra a few days when, in a single night, a curious change seemed to us to have come over all the native population. There was a great falling-off in the good spirits even of the youngsters, and towards afternoon one found signs of irritability which were disconcerting. The cigarettes which I offered were not altogether declined, but I noticed they none of them smoked them, but put them into their pockets. As the day wore on Taïb seemed to lose what little energy he originally had, and to all my questions as to the cause he gave his usual answer, "I do not know."

However, at last we found an Arab who confirmed—what I had suspected—that we were at the beginning of the month of the great Fast which has been previously mentioned.

During the whole month of Ramadhân every Moslem who hopes to gain Paradise practises a strict fast each day from sunrise to sunset, by express command of the Koran. This particular month was chosen because in it the Koran was sent down from heaven. It begins when the new moon appears, and lasts till the appearance of the next new moon, during which time the faithful must abstain from eating, drinking, and all indulgences, from daybreak till sunset.

They may eat and drink "until ye can distinguish

a white thread from a black thread by the daybreak, then fast strictly until night."* So severely is the injunction observed that during the Fast they suffer nothing to enter their mouths or other parts of their bodies; even to smell a perfume is to break the fast; and they must not bathe, or purposely swallow their spittle.

If there is a physical impediment, the Fast can be postponed until the obstacle is removed, when it must be observed for an equal number of days, and the breaking of the Fast must be expiated by giving alms.

The Moslem year being lunar, each month runs through all the different seasons in the course of thirty-three years. Up to Mohammet's day, the year, by unscientific intercalation, had been made to agree roughly with the seasons; unfortunately, having no knowledge of astronomy, Mohammet made a very bad mistake in altering this arrangement, by insisting on the year being twelve lunar months; and confusion has ensued ever since.

The calculation of dates is almost beyond the power of the ordinary Arab, who, in the matter of religious festivals, awaits the announcement of the marabout. As for his own birthday, he leaves it to his mother, who is the only person interested enough to be at the trouble of remembering such a date.

There being no intercalation to make the year correspond with the course of the sun, it amounts to about 356 days 9 hours, bringing New Year's-day about eleven days earlier than in the preceding year.

In the year of our visit (1909), as Ramadhân was in November and December, the hours of fasting did not, of course, entail such suffering as when the fast falls in the summer time; then, in addition to

* Sura ii, 183.

the long hours, the intense heat makes the abstinence, especially from drink, almost unbearable.

But even at this time of the year in Biskra the fast was severe enough to make the setting of the sun a very welcome event. At a given moment a gun was fired, and then the revelry broke forth, as thirst and hunger were assuaged and the convivial instincts of the people were again given play. The cafés became crowded, and custom at the Arab eating-houses and the refreshment stalls was as brisk as at a fair. The flaring lights were turned on to their fullest power, for at all times an Oriental hates drinking in any but a bright light, and more especially after a depressing day of abstinence.

The keepers of the cafés at Biskra had discovered the merits of the acetylene lighting in its very early days, and are now supplanting it with electric light.

This Fast was instituted by Mohammet in perpetuation of his custom of retiring to a cave during the month of Ramadhân for reflection and prayer; and it is possible that before his time the Arabs practised some sort of asceticism about this same time of the year. The Prophet regarded fasting as "the gate of religion," declaring that "the odour of the mouth of him who fasteth is more grateful to God than that of musk." He commended it as an atonement for sin, fasting much himself; fasting, he said, "is a shield"; it is done for God alone, and He will reward it.

Towards the end of the Fast I met Ali, who was in a very quiet and reflective mood. For some time we sat silent in the garden, and then he said: "This is our Night of Power, or *al-Kadr*, the solemn night of which our Prophet wrote in the Koran—*

* Sura xcvii.

" ' Who shall teach thee what the night of power is?
The night of power exalteth a thousand months:
Therein descend the angels, and the spirit, by permission of their Lord, for every matter;
And all is peace till the breaking of the morn.'

"On this night," Ali continued, "the decrees of Allah with respect to life and death, and other important affairs for the ensuing year, are fixed and settled, being taken from the table beside God's throne, and given to the angels to be executed. On this night the Prophet received his first revelation.

" ' By the Book of the Koran on a blessed night have we sent it down, for we would warn mankind,
On the night wherein all things are disposed in wisdom,
By virtue of our behest.' *

"You will not wonder," he said, "that we regard *al-Kadr* with great solemnity. There is another important night, the 15th of Ramadhân, when every year, a little after sunset, the great Sidrah tree in Paradise is shaken, whose leaves are as numerous as the members of the whole human family, each leaf bearing the name of an individual. This tree stands on the loftiest spot in Paradise, in the seventh heaven, on the right hand of the throne of God, being the utmost bounds, beyond which neither men nor angels can pass. When it is shaken on this night the leaves fall on which are inscribed the names of those who are to die in the following year, being more or less withered, according to the length of time the person has yet to live.

"In a few days the Fast will be over," continued Ali, "and the New Year will begin. Early on the

* Sura xliv, 1, 23.

first morning we shall observe, on the plain at Vieux Biskra, what the French call our *Grande Prière*, which I think you will like to see, for most Europeans find it very impressive. It only takes place twice in the year."

We then talked much about this Great Prayer, and I gained information which enabled me on the morning of its performance to follow the service.

We engaged Taïb to acquaint us with the day and hour, and—finding that he was not intending to take part in the Prayer—to accompany us.

Starting from our hotel soon after seven o'clock in the morning, we walked to the plain at Vieux Biskra. Here we found a number of Arab men already assembled, while other groups were constantly coming in from all directions, chanting passages from the Koran as they came, and going at once to their places on the plain, where they removed their shoes, the right one first, and sat down in straight lines.

All this was done by what seemed instinct; for the perfect order of their assembling, which appears in my photographs, was certainly brought about in silence and without the offices of an usher of any sort.

On every face of these gathering worshippers was an expression of rapt spiritual fervour; and when once seated these men kept their eyes towards Mecca, and spoke scarcely a word to each other (they would not discuss any secular subject) during the long period of the assembling of all the great host of worshippers. Here, indeed, they are "souls at rest," in contemplation of the perfections of God, and acquiescing in their knowledge of Him.

On a small hill in front of the multitude incense-



THE GREAT PRAYER: FIRST ATTITUDE

was burning in a great brazier, the smoke rising to heaven in a straight column.

It is not usual for boys to join in this Prayer, but among the most devout of those who were assembling were several lads, who, with the rest, performed a short private prayer before seating themselves in the ever-growing rows of worshippers. Here and there a father had brought with him his little son, who, as the parent sat immovable, quietly played about him in the sand, occasionally nestling in his voluminous robes for rest and warmth. It was a pretty picture of parental affection. Very dear to the Arab father's heart are his little children.

When I mentioned this circumstance to Ali, after the Prayer was over, he said, "Yes. The first deep impression on the mind of many a Moslem boy is made by his father taking him to the Great Prayer. The Prophet taught us that the presence of little children is no hindrance to devotion; in his own prayers he would sometimes hold a child in his arms when he stood up, putting it down when he prostrated himself. The children of his much-loved daughter Fatimah would mount his back when he prostrated himself in prayer."

Still the chanting groups of men arrived, until the plain was almost covered by the white figures. Only once the stillness of waiting was broken, by the sudden appearance of a wild-looking man, who, barking loudly like a dog, marched through the lines, straight up into the primitive pulpit in front, and waved his arms madly, while he again barked. Leaving the pulpit, he rushed about the plain for a few minutes, no one apparently taking any notice of him, until he eventually disappeared. Taïb's only explanation was that the poor creature was a mad

marabout; and his appearance was the only distraction from the almost oppressive quietness and solemnity.

At last the waiting was over. In front of the pulpit a small prayer carpet was spread, and as the figure of a frail old man, who was to act as the Imam, or leader, took his place upon it, the whole congregation rose as one man. The photographs will give some idea of the impressiveness of this great concourse of men in the attitudes of adoration of Allah and of abasement for their unworthiness, but nothing can convey to those who have not heard it a sense of the deep emotion caused by the sound of such a number of men uttering aloud in one voice the praise and the adoration of their God. *"Allah Akbar!"* (God is Great!). *"Lâ ilâha illâ 'llâhu!!"* (There is no God but God!)

Several times the Prayer, with the prostrations, was repeated, with a concentration and a fervour which brought tears to the eyes of many of the onlookers, who were deeply moved both by the spoken adoration of God and by the impressive attitudes of humility and abasement, which ended by every forehead being placed in the dust. It was obvious, as everyone felt, that the worshippers were totally absorbed in their devotions, bearing themselves with an entire aloofness for the time being from any other claims of life, and displaying the calm dignity of those who realised that they had access to Almighty God.

When the Prayer was over the worshippers rose and grouped themselves closely round the pulpit, now occupied by the Imam, who was to preach to them. One of my photographs shows this scene—the listening multitude, the frail figure of the preacher, and the Arab collector (just under the pulpit, in a black



THE GREAT PRAYER : SECOND ATTITUDE

burnous), who is gathering alms for the poor, this being specially a feast of almsgiving.

Once or twice the preacher, who all through his discourse leaned on his staff, flagged, and had to sit for a few moments on the top step of the pulpit. This custom of leaning on a staff was instituted by Mohammet himself, who frequently preached to his followers. The staff, too, is always used as a reminder of the early days of Islam, when it was often needed by the preacher for defence.

The sermon was not long. One of the pithiest sayings of the Prophet is that "the length of a man's prayers and the shortness of his sermons are signs of his common sense."

The sermon being ended, everyone rose; the Imam began a prayer, and all hands, both of Arab worshippers and of onlookers, even to the smallest child, were raised, cup-like, to the breast, to catch the blessings from heaven for which the Imam now supplicated—the remission of sin, recovery of the sick, increase of rain, abundance of corn, preservation from misfortune, freedom from debt.

This part of the Prayer, they believe, is highly acceptable to God. "There is nothing more pleasing before Allah than supplication," the Prophet said, and "supplication is the marrow of worship."

The Prayer ended, the palms of the hands are drawn down the face, symbolically to transfer the benediction to every part of the body; and it was a pretty sight to see even the tiniest baby hands being used in this way.

The service being now over, an extraordinary liveliness took the place of the calm and quiet of the previous hours.

The New Year has now started, the Fast is well

over, the great Feast of the year (*Id al fetr*) has begun.

With the greatest fervour every man is now embracing every acquaintance, his first ambition being to salute the Imam of the Prayer. It is obviously impossible that the frail old man can stand the strain of being embraced by nearly a thousand men, who press round the pulpit steps, now stoutly guarded by four stalwart Arabs; two of whom may be seen with him in the pulpit in my photograph, while the other two are to be seen sitting on the steps during the preaching.

But the congregation will not be altogether denied, and so the ends of the Imam's burnous are hung over each side of the pulpit, and the crowd presses round to kiss the garment. Even then a number of men have to take the kiss by proxy, for they cannot get near enough to touch the garment itself, and the salute is handed to them by those who are more fortunate—or more pushing.

When the pressure of the crowd has abated, the old man is escorted from the pulpit by a strong body-guard, who still protect him from the affectionate manifestations of the crowd, to a carriage, in which he is quickly driven away to his lowly home in Vieux Biskra.

We now set out with Taïb to return to the town, and being overtaken by Ali, who has made the Prayer, we find our progress very much impeded by the constant embraces and mutual congratulations with which our Arab friends are greeted—and which they return—by the men we meet on the road.

It is New Year's Day, they tell us, and they must embrace every man they know, even if he be an enemy, for it is the duty of every good Moslem to



THE GREAT PRAYER : THIRD ATTITUDE

begin the New Year free from ill-feeling towards his fellows.

The mode of the salute to-day is to throw one arm over the shoulder and the other round the side, and kiss each cheek in turn; or, where a less familiar greeting is intended, to place the chin upon the collar-bone and kiss the shoulders.

Ali's talk about the Prayer is full of interest. Telling him how deeply impressed we and other Christian onlookers had been, he replied, "Yes; it was so in the Prophet's own day, for he told us that nearest in affection to the people of Islam are those who say 'We are Christians.'* This because the Christians are not elated with pride." Ali then quoted from the Koran:

> "And when the Christians hear that read which hath been sent down to the Apostle, thou seest their eyes overflow with tears at the truth they recognise therein, saying, 'O Lord we believe; write us down therefore with those who bear witness to it.
>
> "'And what should hinder us from believing in God, and in the truth which hath come down to us, and from earnestly desiring that our Lord would bring us into Paradise with the Just?'
>
> "Therefore hath God rewarded them for these their words."†

Everyone had been much impressed by the saintly bearing of the venerable leader of the Prayer. From Ali we learnt that he is esteemed as a great marabout, a distinguished Arabic scholar, and as a sincere friend of everyone in poverty or distress of any kind. Although a rich man, his life is ruled by strictest denial; he lives in the humblest of mud houses in Vieux Biskra, and although eighty-four years of age,

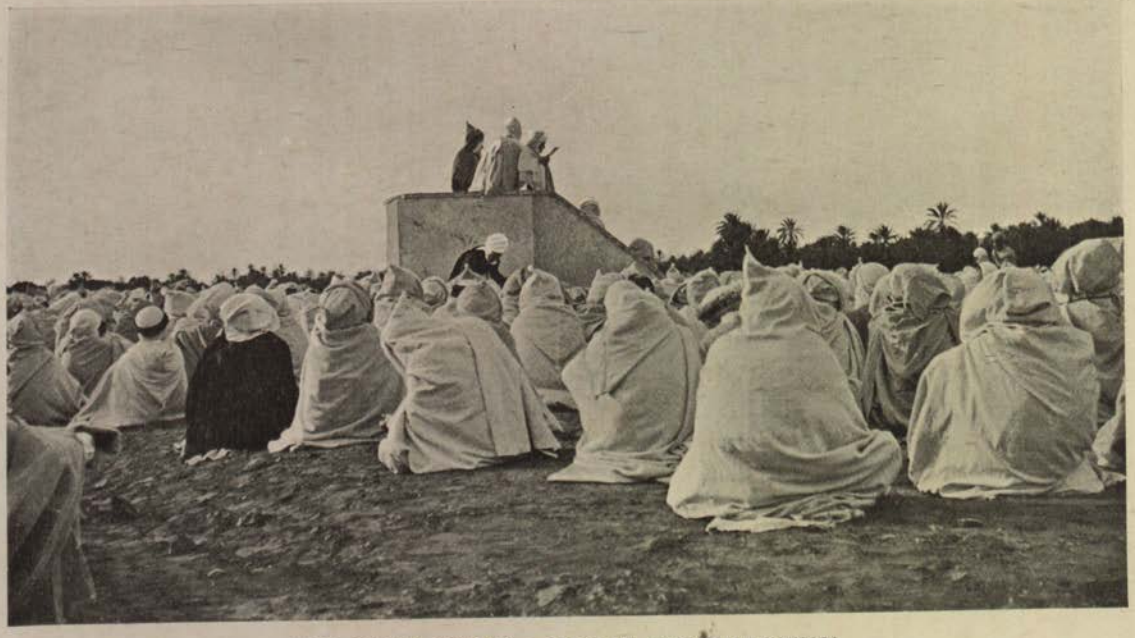
* Sura v, 85. † Sura v, 86, 87, 88.

and very frail, he gives several hours daily to receiving the poor and burdened, supplying their wants and advising them in their difficulties. Even the children go to him with their troubles. He is chosen for the crowning honour of leading the Great Prayer because of his saintliness.

Each mosque has an Imam, the office being supported by endowments, for no congregation of Moslem worshippers can engage in their service without an Imam to lead. The office is not in any sense a sacerdotal one, and the Imam is not set apart with any ceremony, as the Christian custom is. He should be a model to the pious, Mohammet said. "The most worthy to act as Imam is he who repeats the Koran best. Let him act as Imam who knows the Koran thoroughly; and if all present should be equal in that respect, then let him act who is best informed in the rules of prayer; and if they are equal in this respect also, let him act as Imam who has fled his country for the sake of Islam; and if equal in this likewise, let that person act who is oldest; but the servant (or governed) must not act as Imam to the master (or governor)."

It was an instruction from the Prophet that the Imam should be concise in worship, because there might be decrepit, aged, or sick persons present. In his private prayers he may be as prolix as he pleases.

I had remarked that in all this great concourse of Arabs there was not a vestige of the gorgeous apparel in which ordinarily they delight to appear; indeed, with only one or two exceptions (of men wearing a black or brown burnous), every man present at the Prayer was dressed in the simplest of white garments. I mentioned this to Ali, who was himself transformed from his usual resplendent



THE GREAT PRAYER : SERMON AND COLLECTION

appearance to unembroidered white, and he explained that the Moslem must never pray in sumptuous apparel.

"We must be decently clothed, however," he said; "and almost every man here to-day will be wearing new clothes, or clothes of spotless cleanliness; but we have laid aside for the Prayer all costly dress, all but the simplest ornaments, all gold or silver embroidery. We must not seem proud or arrogant in addressing God. But," he added with that child-like glee which often broke through his Arab gravity now that he was more familiar with us, "I go home now and dress myself for the Feast in my very best."

An interesting item of news to us, for Ali had accepted our invitation to dinner that evening, and to be photographed in the courtyard of the Sahara in the afternoon.

These men who have prayed are proud of the dust on their foreheads, "their signs are on their faces, the mark of their prostration."* It is forbidden to smooth the ground by clearing away pebbles or wiping away dust in front of the worshippers. If any of them shall, after death, find themselves in purgatory because their evil actions in life have outweighed their good, they will be distinguished from the utterly wicked by the marks of prostration on those parts of their bodies which used to touch the ground in prayer, and over which the fire can have no power; and by the mercy of God they shall be delivered.

The very shadows of the congregation are thought to worship God,† in the morning and evening, when, being at their longest, according to the position of

* Sura xlviii, 29. † Sura xiii, 16.

the sun, they appear prostrate on the ground as though in adoration.

Ali informed us that during the Prayer the forefinger of every man's right hand is extended, but as it was covered by the burnous we should not see this. It was to remind him that the members of the body may take part in worship and prayer with the tongue and the heart.

Any wandering of the mind or the eye, coughing, or the like, or answering a question, must be strictly avoided during the Prayer. Between the different prayers it is allowed to make three slight irregular motions or deviations from correct deportment; but to lift up the eyes is, as some Moslems think, to incur the risk of becoming blind. The Koran says, "Pronounce not the prayer too loud, neither pronounce it too low; but follow a middle way." *

To Englishmen the subject of the *collection* was naturally of great interest. Was it for the poor, or for "church expenses," or was it for a "missionary society" of the Moslem faith? Almsgiving is highly meritorious to the Mohammedan; as one of their great saints had said, "Prayer carries us halfway to God, fasting brings us to the door of His palace, and alms gain for us admission."

The collection to-day was of the nature of voluntary alms, as distinct from the legal alms which every Mohammedan is constantly exhorted in the Koran to contribute, to be used for the ransom of captives, and to help those who are in debt and broken, and for the advancement of religion, and to help the wayfarer.† But, in addition to this, alms are to be given to the paupers, and to the poor who are in transitory distress; and it was to this

* Sura xvii, 110. † Sura ix, 60.

cause we had all contributed to-day; for while one Arab was collecting from the faithful, another had come to us onlookers with the corner of his burnous held out as an alms-dish for our gifts.

The heart of the Prophet was ever warm and generous towards the poor. Constantly he reproved the arrogance, as well as the futility, of those who trusted in their possessions, using the illustration of the eye of the needle, with which Christians are so familiar. The race, too, is not to the swift, in the teaching of the Koran as in the Old Testament.

"Moreover man, when his Lord trieth him by prosperity and is bounteous unto him,
Then he saith, 'My Lord honoureth me!'
But when he proveth him by afflictions, and withholdeth his gifts from him,
Then he saith, 'My Lord despiseth me!'
By no means." *

There is in the Koran a beautiful verse about the deserving poor, "who, being shut up to fighting for the cause of God, have it not in their power to strike out into the earth for riches. Those who know them not think them rich because of their modesty. By this token ye shall know them—they ask not of men with importunity; and of whatever good thing ye shall give them in alms, of a truth God will take knowledge." †

While Ali wished to impress upon us the importance of alms, and that Allah had promised to repay again and again, he was seriously anxious to show us that the giving of money out of a bad heart could avail nothing. We must give as seeking the face of God. A kind speech and forgiveness are better than alms followed by injury.‡

* Sura lxxxix, 14, 15, 16, 17 (Sale). † Sura ii, 274. ‡ Sura ii, 265

There is a passage on the true meaning of charity, attributed by tradition to Mohammet, which Ali translated and brought to us a few days after this conversation. If it lacks the grandeur of St. Paul's Epistle, it is nevertheless worthy to follow it as an exposition of the true spirit of almsgiving:

"Your smiling in your brother's face is alms;
Your exhorting mankind to virtuous deeds is alms;
Your prohibiting what is forbidden is alms;
Showing men the road when they lose it,
Removing stones and thorns when they are inconvenient to man,
Pouring water from your bucket into that of your brother,
All these are alms for you."

In Biskrá we found that the fête was in full swing, and every child in the place was taking part. Everybody was wearing new clothes; even the poorest had managed to get at least one new garment or a pair of shoes, to conform to the instructions of the traditions, which at this New Year's feast require the people of Islam to renew their clothes. At the only other feast of the year* (*Id al adhâ*) it is obligatory to buy new cooking utensils.

The children make merry to-day by riding in the public vehicles, which have been decorated specially for them. These constantly perambulate the town, crowded even to the roofs with merry youngsters, who sing, and shout, and blow their little trumpets, and hail us and other friends with hearty cheers whenever they catch sight of us. Everyone has been generous to them, and there is not an Arab

* Called the "Feast of Sacrifice," beginning on the tenth day of Dhu'lhajja, when the victims are slain by the pilgrims at Mecca.

child in Biskra who on this day is without the few coppers necessary for a drive and for the buying of sweets and of those fizzing drinks without which no juvenile fête anywhere would be complete.

The men are all smiles and amiable greetings, and we have to drink many cups of coffee outside the cafés in the interests of good fellowship.

The Arab women, Ali told us, were keeping the festival at home, wearing all their finery of silks and jewellery, in which they receive their women friends, whom they entertain with singing, and their primitive music, chiefly of the rude flute, which almost everyone plays. They give presents to each other and to their dependents and the poor. In the afternoon they all visit the cemetery, with their very small children, driving, whenever possible, in vehicles closely covered or, if obliged to walk, going out entirely veiled but for the tiny hole over one eye, which is the custom here. For a man to appear in the cemetery on this particular afternoon would be very bad form. There is much feminine gossiping, and exchanging of compliments, the entire absence of the menfolk no doubt adding much to the freedom of the views which are expressed on domestic matters.

Ali came to dinner with us at the Sahara Hotel that evening, and most resplendent he was in a beautiful new brown burnous, richly embroidered in gold, and worn over an elaborately braided and embroidered suit of blue cloth, and a *haick* of delicate silk—a garment which begins at the head, encircles the face, and falls to the feet, unless festooned to the waist to be out of the way for horse-riding.

After the subdued moods of the month of fasting, Ali was now beaming with good spirits, at times becoming quite jocular as he expanded under the

influence of the excellent dinner provided by host Jean-Jean, who is his own *chef*.

Ali described to us how, at home, he would be sitting on the floor, with his brothers,* round the common pot, dipping straight into the kous-kous, the national dish, with a wooden spoon, a stranger to all the varied apparatus which is necessary to a French dinner of six or eight courses.

His innate good breeding was in every way equal to this new demand on polite manners, and the only point in which a casual observer would have detected that he was not at home at such a meal was the fact that he always ate everything with his right hand; but as most French and American people do the same, even this was not very remarkable. To anyone who had closely studied Arab ways, however, there were many other points in which his nationality or religion would have been shown. Even the manner of raising his tumbler would have revealed him to a Moslem, as would his whispered "In the name of Allah!" when he sat down and (quite unobserved by anyone else in the room) quietly pushed off his shoes under the table.

This French dinner was good for a Mohammedan on the day of the feast, he said; but at other times he must keep his life simple, eating plain food in a simple way.

In the merriest of moods he described to us how, at home, everyone licked the dish when the meal was over, not for greed, but as a point of good manners, and because, in a cryptic sort of sentence, Mohammet had enjoined it—"Whoever eats from a dish and

* Sons when married, or brothers near of an age, eat together. The father generally eats alone, having the dishes first; to be invited to join him would be a great honour for any member of the household, to all of whom he is *sidi*, or lord.

licks it afterwards, the dish intercedes with Allah for him."

The Prophet would not eat off a table, as is the manner of proud men, who do it to avoid bending their backs. This, of course, Ali hastened to explain, only applied to Arabs, for it is lawful for a Mohammedan to eat with Christians (and Jews) in the way customary to their hosts, unless their vessels are polluted with wine or pork. From infancy, he added, the Moslem is taught to observe very particular manners at food; to be modest, not greedy, and very cleanly. "At home," he said, "when the meal is ended, I should place my hands on my dish like this"—illustrating by putting his hands on each side of the plate—"and I should call for drink, which my sisters would bring, and I should only drink once."

Dinner over, Ali's frugal soul was shocked at the suggestion that we should drink coffee in the hotel, where his sharp eye had caught the announcement. "Café filtré, fifty centimes." Could we not adjourn to an Arab café, where the price would be only ten? "And," with a mischievous smile at me, "the coffee is so much better."

The taste for Arab coffee is an acquired one, for it is boiled with the "grounds," each cupful in its own little tin pot, and is made thick with the addition of an enormous quantity of sugar. The taste for it usually grows on the foreigner, while to the Arab it is the greatest luxury in life. "A dish of coffee," quoted Ali, "and a pipe of tobacco are a complete entertainment."

Our guest had, of course, declined the offer of wine at dinner, for this, with all spirituous liquors, is forbidden in Islam. I twitted him with the fact that in heaven the prohibition would be withdrawn, for

amongst the delights in store for the faithful are draughts of pure wine! His answer showed again how close was his knowledge of the Koran.

"It is true that there will be wine in heaven, but I have heard, sir, in a discussion between a Christian and an Arab, on the latter quoting your Bible, that one should not take away a statement from the context! Here is an unmutilated passage from the Koran describing a heavenly banquet:

"A cup shall be borne round unto them filled from a fountain,
Limpid, delicious to those who drink;
It shall not oppress the mind, nor shall they therewith be drunken."*

"The wine, in fact, is 'unfermented,'" he said, using the word with what was a sly reference to a certain controversy in England, of which he had read in a French newspaper, on this same question of teetotalism. "But in another Sura we are told that those who in heaven, because of their purity, approach near unto the Divine presence, 'drink only pure water, they being continually and wholly employed in the contemplation of God.'† Even in heaven, you see, the best men abstain!"

The Prophet forbade wine because of the disgraceful excesses of one of his followers, Hamzah; at the same time prohibiting gaming of every sort.‡ Gambling, he said, caused heart-burnings and quarrels, and intoxicants led to foolish bickering in company and to the neglect of prayer or the indecent performance of it.

On the appearance of this revelation to the Prophet, the teetotal fanatic at once arose and went

* Sura xxxvii, 44, 45, 46. † Sura lxxxiii, 27, 28. ‡ Sura ii, 216.

round the houses of the Moslems of Medina and forcibly emptied their vessels of all liquor; and it is amusing to know that even in those days the opponents of abstinence bethought them of "the poor widows and orphans" whose subsistence would be injured by the deterioration—not of brewery or distillery shares—but of their property which had been invested in wine!

Unfortunately one sometimes sees a drunken Arab in Biskra, where the absinthe and other spirits in the French cafés have proved an awful curse to the natives; and the French Tombola, set up in the square by the Garden of Gazelles, exercises a fatal fascination over the Arab men and boys. This year the gaming tables of the Casino were not opened during my stay, but I was told that during previous seasons the Arabs had crowded the place, and such was their skill and cunning that the owner had come out the loser. All this depravity, however, is a cause of sadness to the pious Moslem, who always deplores the new vices which European conquest has brought with it.

To the Europeans at our hotel the Feast had been the subject of much inquiry and speculation, and the evasive answers to all questions made by the guides, beginning with Taïb's "I do not know," only added to the general perplexity.

"Why was it called by many, instead of the 'Feast of breaking the Fast,' the 'Feast of Mutton'? Why was a sheep killed in the early part of the day (being the first day of the month Shawâl) by a member of every household? Why was the lintel of the houses sprinkled with the blood? And why, on an outside corner of the roof of most of the houses, was a jar placed?"

So much afraid of the thoughtless scoffing, or the light jest, at their religious observances and superstitions are the boys and men who wait about the hotels, that they will even go so far as to deny that these things, belonging to the Feast, had been done at all. As I did not care to bombard Ali with further questions, it called for a great deal of patient inquiry, with information gathered a little here and a little there, to get a connected story.

It is clear, first of all, that the sheep is killed to commemorate the intended sacrifice by Abraham of his son, who was redeemed by a ram. The actual feast is made with this sheep or lamb, and part of the food is given to the poor. The sprinkling of the lintel with the blood doubtless got its origin from another practice of old Bible days.

As for the jar on the housetops, Ali volunteered that it contained the barley of the Prophet, consisting of the last food eaten by the sheep before it is slain. Any more exact information than this it seemed impossible to elicit. I wondered if it had anything to do with those souls of the faithful whose spirits, according to a tradition of the Prophet, rest in the crops of green birds. Or was it an offering to the jinns or genii, which mischievous spirits are thought to be kept in prison during Ramadhân, and when they come out—and this would, of course, be the first day of their release—station themselves on roofs and throw down bricks and stones at passers-by. As they are very apt to pilfer provisions, it is possible that the barley is put out in the hope of satisfying them without further loss to the householder. This, however, is mere conjecture; of the facts—"I do not know."

I found that, to secure themselves against the

jinns, the devout repeat the words, "In the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful!" on locking the doors of their houses, rooms, or closets, or covering the bread-baskets or any vessel containing food.

The killing of the lamb for the Feast is regarded as a great honour.

Deep is the devotion of the Arab women to their sons, and it is touching to see the sacrifice a poor struggling widow woman will make to turn her boy out in fine clothes for this Feast. But the climax of her joy is reached when the boy, having gained the age of about eighteen, kills his first lamb for the Feast as a sign that he is now a man; she having first washed his feet to show that she recognises her first-born as the head and guardian of the home. Usually this is the occasion of his first taking part in the Great Prayer, in preparation for which he must keep his first fast.

Our boy Taïb, being only sixteen, has yet to kill the lamb; the mere thought of it makes the timid lad shrink from his coming responsibilities as his mother's only son. When we asked him why he did not join in the prayer, he, with tears in his eyes, said, "If my father had lived, he would have taken me every year. Perhaps when I am eighteen I shall go with my friends."

It is at two years of age that a boy's hair is first cut, and this is made the occasion of a feast. About this age he is first given a burnous. A tiny friend of ours on his second birthday blossomed out into a gorgeous cloak of pale blue cloth, splendidly embroidered in gold; his small nurse could scarcely muster enough breath in her almost speechless pride to inform us that it had cost *fifty francs!*

At any age from about two to seven the boys must invariably be circumcised, although the ordinance is not laid down in the Koran. This is mostly done during the month of Ramadhân, and nearly every day there were the most exciting Arab processions, with the women dancing quite prettily, and the men letting off fire-arms with the loudest possible reports and the maximum of smoke. The little objects of the fête rode on the backs of horses or mules, with the gayest caparison possible. Great was my amusement one day to see a proud Arab of about five years striding his horse in haughty state as the centre of so much demonstration and gaiety, *puffing a cigarette!*

> " All unconscious of their doom
> The little victims play ! "

The operation itself is performed according to clearly laid-down laws by a marabout.

When Ali took leave of us at the end of the evening he overwhelmed us with profound thanks for what he called his *short* time of pleasure.

I afterwards found that it is usual with all Arabs to describe what they like as of short, and what they dislike as of long, duration.*

* Sura xxiii, 115.

CHAPTER IV

WE VISIT OUR ARAB FRIENDS, AND SEE THE FAMOUS JARDIN LANDON

READERS will have noticed that up to this point I have scarcely mentioned the existence of Arab women. The fact is that during the first weeks of our stay in Biskra we never saw a woman, with the exception of the dancing girls (the Ouled Naïls), who inhabit two little streets of the town, where they appear unveiled and bedecked in jewels, and are consequently outside the ken of the respectable Arab women.

We were naturally curious as to the hidden lives led by the wives and daughters of our now numerous friends, but as we had been warned that the Arab regards it as most improper for anyone even to ask after his womenfolk we saw little chance of learning anything about native home-life.

However, as time went on, and we gained the confidence of different friends, the opportunities we had coveted arose. First, our boy Taïb brought us an invitation from his mother at Vieux Biskra, telling us that if we cared to go to his home a young married sister would be there to help his mother to receive us.

Of course we accepted; and on the morning chosen we were proudly taken by the lad to his home, which is one of the mud houses standing on the beautiful road leading through Ras-el-guerria.

On either side of this road are palm gardens,

varied by two or three orange groves, in which the fruit was now ripe. It is a charming road, with the low mud walls of the gardens, and the brisk little canal (called a *seguar*) of sparkling water running by the side; and it became our favourite walk, for here we always found shelter from the north wind and shade from the scorching sun, while the native life passing up and down between Biskra market and Vieux Biskra gave it constantly varying interest and colour.

Arrived at Taïb's door—we must remember that being the only son of his mother, and she a widow, he is the *man* of the house and is already deferred to by the women of his family—we witnessed the quiet courtesy with which alone it is proper for a Moslem to enter a dwelling.

By the Prophet's example, on coming to a door, one should stand not in front of it, but on the side, and say in a low voice, "The Peace of God be with you!"

In the Koran the most particular instructions are given as to the observance of good manners in entering a house not your own, and as we found that Taïb's mother shared their home with another family, it was necessary for him to keep these rules.

> "Oh ye who believe! enter not into other houses than your own, until ye have asked leave, and have saluted its inmates."*

Having saluted the house, Taïb pushed open the rough outer door, and entered the dark, windowless hole, with a mud floor, which, for want of a better word, one must call the vestibule. Here he sang out in Arabic his request for admission, upon which

* Sura xxiv, 27.



Photo: Bougault, Biskra

THE PRETTY ROAD FROM BISKRA TO RAS-EL-GUERRIA

after a few seconds of waiting—for it shows great rudeness to enter any house abruptly—the inner door was opened by a child, and Taïb asked us to enter the room to which it led.

It was a fairly large room, with rough mud walls and uneven mud floor. It had no window, but there was a square hole in the middle of the ceiling—which was supported by the trunk of a palm-tree—and through this the smoke from the fire on the floor made its way out. In one corner a well-grown lamb was tethered.

There was no furniture whatever in the room, but we could discern in the half-light that Taïb's poor old mother was rising from one of the mats which are spread upon the floor and take the place of the chairs and sofas which we think necessary for comfort. Our hostess was not veiled, and as she came shyly forward Taïb proudly introduced us. We shook her hand, and she requested her boy, in whom it was plain to see her soul delighted, to give us polite messages of welcome, which he translated into French for us. In return we asked him to put into Arabic, for his mother's pleasure, sentiments of interest in him, and our sense of the honour she had done us to invite us to her home.

At this moment, out of the darkness of a recess, afterwards seen to be a kind of cupboard which must be called a bedroom, came a girlish figure, clothed in pretty colours, and jingling with much jewellery, whom Taïb introduced with beaming satisfaction as his sister.

She was a beautiful girl of about nineteen, having small features, an olive complexion, small teeth which were quite perfect, and those lovely soft brown eyes which are seen in no other people. It was a great

surprise to us that she had entirely laid aside her veil, and when we expressed to Taïb that we were pleased, he replied that we were "his friends," speaking the words in such a way as implied that nothing more need be said.

We had heard much of Arab hospitality, the truth of which we were fully to prove during our stay in Biskra. In this poor home every thing the inmates possessed was offered, and while we talked to the younger woman the older one was already squatting by the fire, fanning it into flames as she fed it with dried palm branches, in the hope that we should consent to let her make us a griddle cake at least.

Meanwhile Taïb was spreading mats for us to sit on, but, thinking it kinder to decline any food which required cooking, we consented to the suggestion to see the house and go up to the flat roof.

A candle was lighted to show the way, and in the most deprecating manner Taïb's sister offered to accompany us. The deference paid to men, which would not allow this girl to go out of the door before me, until I had strongly insisted, was not comfortable to a European.

The "house" consisted of the room we were in, one or two tiny windowless rooms leading off it which were used for sleeping purposes, while up a very dark and ramshackle staircase we found a small loft filled with dates—which were, of course, offered us without stint—another loft used as a bedroom, and a door leading on to the roof. Here on the wall surrounding the house several pigeons were perched, looking beautiful in the clear sunlight which, with the cloudless blue sky, contrasted so delightfully with the darkness of the interior of the house. On this roof, Taïb informed us, he and the other "men" of

the house slept all through the summer, enjoying the comparative coolness of being in the open air.

When we had descended, the two Arab women timidly examined my wife's jewels, and with much interest she returned the compliment. I am quite sure, if it were not for the diamonds worn by European women, and which the Arabs admire extremely, the latter would in no way envy the possessions of their visitors, who in their eyes are to be pitied for the inadequate amount of jewellery which they wear, and especially for their lack of the engraved anklets which the Arab women seem to value above all their other treasures.

Very human, in spite of their subjection, are these poor women of the East, and, in their personal vanities, very little different from the women who live under conditions of freedom sufficient even to produce the suffragette. A distinct warning by the Prophet about these anklets, "Let the women not strike their feet together so as to discover their hidden ornaments," has not been enough to suppress the tinkling which always betrays the approach of an Arab woman, any more than, I suppose, the most drastic warning would suppress the rustling of silk skirts by which many English women betray a little innocent pride.

As these two gentle women came to the door with us to say good-bye they could not refrain from a little clanking of their ornaments, and in their child-like minds I felt sure they experienced delight at the impression of grandeur they were making.

Taïb's sister ventured very shyly to ask if we would care to visit her at her own home some day, where she would show us how she worked at a hand-loom in the weaving of the stuff of which men's

burnouses were made, an invitation we readily accepted.

The code of manners set forth in the Koran as to entering houses has many other points in addition to those of asking leave, and giving the salutation, "*Al salam aleica*" (Peace be upon thee).

If there is no one at home when you knock, you may not enter unless leave be given, and if there are inmates and they say, "Go ye back," then you must go back. In no case is it decent to be importunate for admission, or to wait at the door.

It is not, however, wrong to enter houses in which no one dwells, or to go into public cafés, shops, sheds, and so on, without preamble, for the supply of your needs.*

Three times in the day—before the first morning prayer, and when the garments are laid aside at noon for the siesta, and after the evening prayer—even the members of the household, and children and servants, must regard the privacy of their superiors, not entering into their presence without leave. After these times they may go freely in and out of the different rooms without special leave. But when children are of age they must ask leave at all times to come into the parents' presence, "as they who were before them asked it."

On the way back to Biskra we passed the entrance to the little palm-garden in which Taïb owns an interest, shared with two others, and, finding that we were anxious to see it, he took us round the small domain. There were a number of date-palms and one or two fig-trees.

The date-tree was, I am sure, created for the Arab people, for it exactly meets their needs. Very little

* Sura xxiv, 29.

work is wanted to cultivate it; as someone has said, the only demand the date-palm makes is that "its feet shall be in a stream of water and its head in the furnace of heaven."

Nature has here provided the water in the exhaustless springs of the Biskra oasis, and when man has once made the seguar—or little canal—little more requires to be done than to direct the supply of water; and as for the furnace, that may be entirely left as Nature's work.

When the palm-tree flowers, each bloom has to be fertilised by hand (with rare exceptions), and, of course, in the autumn the dates must be gathered, packed, and despatched.

The innumerable little irrigation streams are fed from the main canals, which are directed from the source of the precious water supply through every village of the oasis, going many miles on their life-giving errand.

The hundreds of gardens are watered at strictly stated times, an elaborately arranged system of damming being used to direct the flow.

A right to water is, of course, most important in the East, where irrigation, and not rainfall, must be looked to to sustain life. The more the date is watered the larger and more juicy the fruit. To get the best results it should have the rivulet flowing about its roots every third or fourth day; a condition possible at Biskra, which as a consequence is famous for its dates.

Naturally there will be disputes between the different owners of gardens as to the fairness of the division of the supply, for the moment one man fails to dam up the canal after the period for the water to run through his garden is up, he is practically

robbing his neighbour by detaining the stream from the waiting channel.

These water disputes in Biskra are referred to the Kaid, the Arab chief, who decides the just proportion of water allowed to each garden. Without his permission no person may in any way alter or obstruct the water running through his own ground. In some parts of the East this question of irrigation leads to more disputes, and even murders, than anything else.

In the palm-gardens we often saw Arab men making their formal prayers at the appointed times, Mohammet having said, "Acceptable is devotion in the garden and the orchard."

Taïb and his partners in this garden had never found it necessary to appeal to the Kaid, having good neighbours. As in our Christian religion, so in the Koran, the duty to one's neighbour is much insisted on, and it is as carefully observed by the pious Moslem as by the sincere Christian. "Show kindness unto your neighbour, whether kinsman or new-comer." *

We asked Taïb how it came about that three neighbours were owners of one garden which so conveniently adjoined their combined home.

With Moslems, we found, the duty of neighbours is especially observed in the sale of property. The Prophet laid it down that the neighbour of a house has a first right to the purchase of it, or of adjoining land. And if a neighbour is absent from home, the owner must defer a sale until his return.

In this village of Ras-el-guerria—as in nearly every Arab village—there is, near the mosque, a rough roof across the road, under which, on each

* Sura iv, 40.

side, seats of mud have been made; upon these, sheltered alike from wind, sun, and rain, we generally found seated one or two poor men engaged in repeating the names of God, reciting prayers, or in other ways, as the Irish say, "making their souls." Usually these are poor strangers, without friends or place of abode, who ask the protection of the faithful. The custom of making these sheltered seats has been continued from the Prophet's days; for he was very good to the "sitters on the bench," as he called them, and often, when he went in to meals, he would call some of them to join him; and his generous example is followed to this day.

The next invitation we received was from Ali, who desired us to take coffee with him at his house. Accordingly, on the afternoon named, we rang the bell of the important residence in which our friend had a small suite of rooms, cut off from the rest of the house, which was occupied by his parents and their other children.

Although the Arabs of this class do not live in the rough mud houses of the poorer natives, they have their dwellings built on the same plan, with one floor only, and without ordinary windows, the light being admitted through one or two openings near the ceiling in each room, so that the interiors are cool and the sunlight much softened, even in the hottest weather.

We were admitted by a tiny Arab servant maid, who retired at once as Ali appeared to welcome us. He was all delighted smiles, and in the pleasure of receiving guests his usual gravity had fled, and both he and an Arab friend, who had joined the party, became like schoolboys entertaining chums at a tuck-shop.

His friend was a son of a local Kaid, a handsome youth of eighteen, who told us that he was a student of medicine at Constantine. He hoped eventually to gain his diploma in Paris, and then become the first Arab doctor to practise in Biskra, where, indeed, a magnificent field of service to suffering humanity awaits him.

The sitting-room was quite European in its furnishing, for there were a table and chairs, a large wardrobe sort of cupboard in one corner, and on the other side a handsome chest of drawers. To my surprise there were, too, three or four pictures on the walls, representing pretty children of the type associated in our minds with our Christmas annuals.

The only things reminding us specially of the East were the beautiful rugs on the floor, and a handsome chased brass ewer, with a thin spout, and a basin, with which we are familiar from having seen illustrations of them in books of travel, as they are being used for the Moslem ablutions.

There were, of course, no ladies of the household present, Ali himself disappearing into the recesses of the house to bring in the coffee, which he did with much droll mimicry of a French waiter at the Café Glacier in the town. The coffee, made in an Arab kitchen, was, of course, delicious; and we had cakes, and a dish of Biskra dates, which Ali advised us to eat with the shelled walnuts provided. This was not a true native meal, but an invention devised by Ali to take the place of English "high-lif' " afternoon tea.

We were a merry party, and the little meal was over all too soon. In the intervals of our talk we had caught the sound of female voices from the other part of the house, referring to which Ali said his mother had several callers—ladies, of course—whom

he imitated as all talking gossip at the same time. He is obviously devoted, as Arab men usually are, to his mother, and apologised because the many callers made it impossible for her to receive my wife that day.

To our great surprise, however, a little later on—when his friend had excused himself owing to the pressing nature of his "affairs" and had left us, after kindly inviting us to visit his father's house—Ali went out and returned with a sister, a girl of twenty, who, all shyness and confusion, allowed herself, with a little good-humoured persuasion, to be brought into the room and introduced to us. As she talked French a little (a very unusual thing in an Arab woman), we were able to chat with her, as much as her extreme shyness would permit.

In a few minutes Ali disappeared a second time, to return almost carrying in his arms a second sister, a little older than the first. All blushes, she too spoke timidly to us in French, both girls agreeing that their brother was a great tease.

This sister, of whose beauty we had heard from an English lady who had visited her mother, was, my wife and I agreed, one of the loveliest women we had ever seen. She was more queenly in form and manner than Taïb's pretty sister, and, if possible, her eyes were more wonderfully beautiful. She had the same perfect teeth, and her mouth had those delicate curves rarely seen after childhood; and a wealth of hair of blue-black hue set off the purity of her complexion.

In the privacy of their home these girls and Ali evidently played together like nursery children. Ali was proud of his sisters, while they had for him a deep devotion which made them his slaves.

After a few minutes, during which we had exchanged simple compliments, the girls' shyness created a pause. With that wonderful instinct for making things easy for his guests which the Arab host never lacks, Ali relieved the impending awkwardness with a joke. Seeing that his sisters' modesty would make any formal adieux impossible, he pretended to become severe at their waste of time, and with a mischievous twinkle in his eye he assumed the air of a stern jailer, and, rapping the table suddenly with a spoon, cried, "Travaillez! Travaillez!" (Work! Work!) at which both sisters scuttled out of the room in an instant, the anklets of the beauty defying all the moral precepts. It was a funny scene, at which we laughed heartily.

I expressed to Ali our pleasure at meeting his sisters, delicately hinting at my surprise at their appearing unveiled.

"To friends," he replied, "nothing is hidden"—taking care to add, however, that this did not apply to Arab friends.

It was clear that if the medical student had not taken his leave we should not have been favoured in this way. I frequently found afterwards, while walking on the country roads, or on finding myself near the cemeteries on the days when the women were there, the truth of Ali's statement that the Arab ladies, having found that Europeans do not stare at them, will drop the veil if no Arab man is in sight, taking little or no notice of the presence of an Englishman.

Ali now proceeded to show us his treasures, which, to our astonishment, consisted in a great store of rich clothes intended for a girl. There were shoes of all sorts, from the most elaborately embroidered to

those intended for plainest use. There were robes of costly cloth, veiling in great lengths of every sort of fascinating material, little gold embroidered caps, and yards of delicate stuffs for wear round the head. There was also jewellery of every sort, from the heavy silver anklets to the prettiest finger-rings. Drawerful after drawerful he brought out and piled on the floor. And then he opened the cupboard, to display another store of materials in brilliant colours and of strange patterns, including two very handsome nuptial cushions.

My wife was filled with wonder and curiosity. "And who is to wear them?" she inquired.

"Madam," said Ali, with a touch of sadness we could not understand, "these will one day be for my wife. For years my father has insisted on my buying them, according to our custom; and they represent many *economies!*"—this with almost comic self-pity.

"How strange! This is what we call in England the 'bottom drawer!' But *there,* it is the girl who fills it in readiness for her marriage. The bride comes to her husband richly provided with everything of this sort."

"Madam," responded Ali, as he made a feint to dash through the door, "I go to England at once!"

"Are you engaged to be married?" we asked.

"No!" and he became serious again at once. "No! but my father wishes me to be married to an Arab girl of fifteen he has heard of at Chetma, and that within a few weeks. I am over twenty, and he thinks it a disgrace that I should not be married. He is a pious Moslem, having made the pilgrimage to Mecca, and always reminds me that the Prophet condemned celibacy as a lower form of life than marriage. A healthy man unmarried Mohammet

called 'a brother of the Devil!' Celibacy is not *condemned* in the Koran, but because Mohammet said to a follower, who wished to live without marriage, 'When a Moslem marries he perfects his religion,' my father, whom I must, of course, obey, commands me to marry.

"I do not wish to marry a mere child, who has learned nothing, who cannot talk to me, and who must never go out walking with me. Madam, I have met several young ladies of your country, and I have seen how clever they are, how intelligently they talk, what good companions they are to their men relatives, to their husbands what you call 'helpmates,' and I have longed that I might be married in the European way. But, alas! my father's patience in so often putting off the arrangement of an Arab marriage is exhausted, and so he has already been to Chetma; he has seen the uncle of the girl, and has offered 2,000 francs for her. In a few days my mother will go to see her, then the marriage-day will be settled, and I shall find myself allied to a girl I have never seen. Let us not talk of it. I am *très triste* to think of it!"

When we left, Ali came out with us to stroll in the gardens, where, with native instinct, he chose a spot which screened us from too much observation. Here we met an old Arab gentleman, whom we had several times seen Ali walking with hand in hand, a sign with Arabs of affectionate friendship. Nothing is more pleasing than to see the number of such friendships between old and young Arab men. He proved to be the Arab judge at Sidi Okba, the most interesting oasis about fourteen miles farther out into the desert than Biskra. Hearing that it was our intention to visit his native place, he most kindly —through Ali, for he spoke no French—gave us a

very hearty invitation to visit him a week later, promising to give us a truly Arab meal of kous-kous.

Needless to say, we accepted the invitation, our pleasure being heightened by the promise of Ali to accompany us. Our experiences on that visit were so interesting that I withhold them for a time so that they may have a chapter to themselves.

Ali told us that the position of judge (Qāzi) is an old and important one, the qualifications for which the Prophet has very clearly laid down. It becomes a Moslem not to covet the appointment. "Whosovere," said Mohammet, "seeks the appointment shall be left alone, but to him who accepts the office on compulsion an angel shall descend and guide him." He must be adult, a free man, a Moslem, sane, and unconvicted of slander. His office must be established in some public place, a court in the chief mosque being recommended. He must not accept presents, except from relations and friends, and must attend no feasts but those given by such as are most intimately related to him.

I was anxious to question Ali—when his Arab friend had at last hurried away to catch the afternoon *diligence*—on the subject of the pictures which we had seen in his room, and which were a sign of advanced views on the part of a Moslem.

When the Prophet forbade wine and games of chance and divining, he declared that images or statues were also "an abomination of the work of Satan."* The word (*ansab*) has been expanded to mean all figures, or representation of figures, so that in Arabic art neither human beings nor animals are ever carved or painted; and even the camera is detested as "the Devil's box."

* Sura v, 92.

By some it is thought that Mohammet was referring chiefly to the carved pieces with which the pagan Arabs played at chess, being small figures of horses, men, elephants, and camels, so that to this day the strict observers of the letter of the Koran forbid the game of chess with any but plain pieces.

I think it is more probable that the Prophet was thinking of the idols which he had destroyed, his intention being that it should be made impossible to revive them in any form. It is true, however, that, in the traditions, Mohammet went further and cursed those who painted or made drawings of men or animals, and consequently by many Moslems all pictures are held to be unlawful.

It is believed that, in addition to the idols in the church at Mecca, which the Prophet destroyed, there was a picture of the Virgin Mary, which may have been worshipped in the same way as the images, and, to make assurance doubly sure, in his abolition of idolatry the Prophet uttered the second curse.

All this I discussed with Ali, who argued that the letter of the Koran was sometimes followed so slavishly as to defeat the true intentions of Mohammet's mind, and to hamper the proper development of his followers. He did not believe that such a wise ruler as their Prophet could have meant to shut out his people for ever from all practice and enjoyment of art. And so he (Ali), while preserving the Moslem detestation of anything in the nature of religious statuary or sacred pictures, was quite ready to approve of other works of art, as well as to believe that photography was allowable to the Moslem.

While these opinions would be repugnant to the older Mohammedan, I found a general disposition on the part of the younger men to adopt them.

The next day Taïb suggested that it was our duty to visit the Jardin Landon, sometimes called the Villa Benevento, which "Monsieur Hichens" has made so famous in "The Garden of Allah." Accordingly we set forth, going by the Old Biskra road, in the shadelessness of which we were able to realise a little the intensity of the sun's rays in this dry and rarefied atmosphere. But by doing this we escaped the road of insanitary horrors which runs by the side of the negro village, the disgrace of which has, I hope, by this time been remedied by the authorities.

Turning off the road on the left, we made towards what looked like a tropical shrubbery, above which rose the tall palms, enclosed by a high mud wall, crossing an open field in which a casual and ragged sort of grain crop was just springing up.

At the corner of the shrubbery wall I happened to notice a small leafless tree, tied all over with bits of rag of every kind of material. This, Taïb said, was a Holy Tree, and those who had tied the rags on it had torn the pieces off the garments they were wearing, and had said a prayer consisting of certain verses from the Koran.

This was quite a lengthy explanation to come from Taïb, but it did not altogether quench our thirst for information. All my further questions, however, were met with the lad's gentle but conclusive, "I do not know."

I remembered, however, that Burton came across such a tree on his pilgrimage, and, as a supposed Moslem, he had "added a rag to its coat of tatters."

These trees are found throughout the whole of Islam. I afterwards found another in Biskra, near the cemetery, and this, I believe, was used exclusively by childless women in their prayers to be relieved

from what, in the East, is a disgrace and a reason for divorce.

The origin of the sacred tree is unknown, going back to the time of the pagan Arabs. Many believe that the Prophet permitted the practice; indeed, there is the expedition of Zát at Riká'a (place of the shreds of cloth), which is supposed to be a term for a tree to which the Moslems tie their *ex-voto* rags. The rag torn direct from the garment of the supplicant is supposed to have a sort of clairvoyant effect in bringing the owner of it intimately into touch with the spirit from whom aid is sought.

In this belief a rag is in some places tied on to the gate of the tomb of a marabout. At Cairo, I believe, the spirit of a great saint is supposed to linger round the city gate; and men hang bits of rag, teeth, and other personal fragments on the gate to attract the attention of the saint.

Sometimes a strip of cloth is torn from the garment of a person who is sick and taken and tied to such a tree, in the belief that the illness will, through this medium, pass away.

I told all this later on to Taïb, who, I suspect, knew it as well as I did, and certainly understood the local usages in the matter a good deal better, but he still looked pleasantly blank. I think he considered such mysteries wasted on the unbelievers, who, with that touch of arrogance which the best of us always betray, would ridicule what they were not worthy to understand.

Arrived at the garden entrance, we were required to use the great knocker to summon the "guardian." Entering, we walked into the large sanded courtyard in front of that detached part of the brilliantly white house which forms a boundary of the garden;

on our left stretched the cool avenues of tropical trees in long vistas towards the desert.

Just inside the gate an Arab tent was pitched on a green knoll, in which the "guardian" lives and sleeps.

The whole beautiful scene could not but seem familiar to anyone who has read Mr. Hichens's unapproachably graphic descriptions of it.

To add to the impression that we were living over again a beautiful experience which we had previously dreamed, the haunting notes of an Arab flute were heard coming from the shady depths, produced, as Taïb told us, by no other than the original Larbi himself.

If some visitors to the garden have felt a slight tinge of disappointment, it is, I think, because, to the English mind, a famous garden is a place in which a profusion of flowers, set in green lawns, delights the eye.

Here, when the young Count Landon set out to make a garden where before had been a bare waste of stones and sand, the ideal he set himself was—having brought water in the seguars—to create *shade* from every rare and beautiful shrub and tree which, with patience and skill, might be made to grow at the edge of the desert. The many varieties of palm-trees to be found here would alone make the garden famous.

What we know as "flower-beds" are almost entirely absent. At no given time is the garden ever like an English garden in August, when everything reaches a climax of brilliant and luxurious beauty, in a short time to fade and die.

In the Jardin Landon there are many flowers, but most of them thrive only by seeking the shade of the

trees. There are wonderful climbing plants with gorgeous blooms, climbing roses, hedges of hibiscus, and everywhere the geranium growing in great bushes.

Coming into the cool green tunnels from the glare and heat of the sun, hearing the splash of the water coursing through the innumerable channels, sitting in the delightful arbours, or on the wall from which one looks across the vast sandy ocean of the Sahara, the fascination of the garden grows upon one hour by hour.

All the time, to-day, Larbi plays upon his flute those weird and sad airs which the Arabs love, and which have upon the Western mind a haunting effect from which it can never set itself altogether free.

In one of the avenues we come across the smoking-room, built for the entertainment of his Arab friends by the Count, with beautiful rugs for them to sit on, spread upon the divans surrounding the walls.

In another part we found the French drawing-room, with the blue-dog, the famous mascot, about which the novelist makes such imaginative play.

On all sides the Arab gardeners were silently and elusively at work—their numbers being augmented because the date harvest was being gathered—and it is true that their chief concern seems to be to preserve the marvellous tidiness of the garden, by which not a leaf is ever allowed to be out of place or the sand of the paths to be ruffled.

We remembered that only pious Moslems are employed here, men who say their prayers five times a day and keep the fasts; and that it is necessary to have five men to guard the domain at night, firing guns at intervals as a warning to intending marauders.

Guided by the sounds of his flute, we sought out Larbi, and found him reclining on a green bank, while he pensively played his love songs. After some conversation he confided to us that his ambition was to go to London, where Monsieur Hichens had promised to meet him. By many economies he had managed to save quite a large sum, and when this had grown a little more he would be ready to set off. Since Monsieur wrote his book he (Larbi) had made many English friends who had been generous to him. He had many beautiful clothes (we afterwards met him in the town arrayed like a prince), and did we think he could wear them in London?—a question we would not venture to answer, advising him to seek the opinion of Monsieur Hichens. In this answer we are interested, for we hope that one day our friend Ali may venture—"if it please Allah"—to travel to England to visit us, and the thought of him in hideous European clothes is perhaps more appalling than the contemplation of the ordeal it would be to escort him through the streets of London in his graceful and gorgeous native attire.

In speaking of the Jardin Landon to the Arabs, I always found considerable reserve in any approval of it which they might express. Count Landon is very popular for his kindly and generous treatment of the poor, and for the faith he has always shown in the Arab people, for whom he undoubtedly has an affectionate regard.

But in the pious Moslem mind there is, I believe, always a doubt (although this was never expressed in words) as to whether the great Allah is pleased when a man builds gorgeous palaces, or makes resplendent gardens, for himself.

One of our friends, a man much given to quiet

reflection, who had travelled as far as England, said one day, when we were discussing one of our great houses which he had seen, "Is it good for a man to have so much splendour and enjoyment in this life? He is in Paradise already; will he do anything here to earn an entrance into heaven? And how dreadful death and punishment must be to one who has had such indulgence and happiness below!"

It was this friend who read to us the Sura in the Koran called "The Daybreak,"* which deals with those who, because of great and splendid possessions, "behaved insolently in the land, and multiplied excesses therein," and points out how much better it is to do good works here for a reward in the future life, while preserving in this present life a soul which is at rest. In this Sura the people of Irem are mentioned, and how God dealt with them. The king's two sons (our friend related) extended their kingdom, after their father's decease, until their power covered the greater part of the earth. One of them, having heard of the delights of the celestial Paradise, made a garden, with the intention of imitating it, in the desert of Aden. When it was finished he set out, with a magnificent retinue, to see it. All this time the Lord, who standeth on a watch-tower whence He observeth the actions of men, had seen this, and had prepared a punishment. When the king and his followers had come within a day's journey of the garden, they were all destroyed by an awful manifestation from heaven.

That afternoon, as we sat chatting with Ali in the public gardens opposite our hotel, in the shade of the mimosa avenue, he related to us, apropos of our visit in the morning, the story of a garden of

* Sura lxxxix.

which mention is made in the Koran,* putting it into his own words, which I venture to think interesting enough for repetition:

"This palm garden was near Mecca, and belonged to a charitable man who remembered the poor. When he was ready to gather his dates, he first gave notice to his needy neighbours, as is the custom of the generous Moslem, so that they might come to the garden and pick up such of the fruit as had been blown down by the wind, or fell on the ground outside the limit of the cloth spread beneath the trees to receive it, or was missed by the knife of those who cut the clusters off the trees. This good man died, and his two sons, who inherited the garden, proved to be irreligious and mean men. In entering their garden to gather its fruits they omitted to say 'If Allah will,' and, ignoring their father's example, they determined to give no notice to the poor, and, to evade their importunities, to gather their dates at dawn while their poor neighbours were still in bed.

"'So they went whispering to each other,
No poor man shall set foot this day within your garden.'

"But God had taken notice of their evil intentions while they slept, and He encompassed their garden and swept it with desolation, so that it became black and barren.

"And when they came to the garden at daybreak, and saw that it was blasted, they were bewildered and said, 'This is not our garden; we have mistaken our way.'

"And when they found that it was their garden,

* Sura lxviii.

they cried, 'Verily we are forbidden to reap our own fruits!'

"One, more worthy than the other, said, 'Did I not say unto you, Will ye not give praise unto God?'

"And together they said, 'Praise be unto our Lord! We have done unjustly!'

"And they began to blame one another, saying, 'Woe be unto us! Verily we have been transgressors. Peradventure our Lord will give us a better garden in exchange; verily we crave this, with delight in the presence of their Lord.'

"From which they learnt the chastisement of this life. But the chastisement of the next life is more grievous; to remember which is to take heed.

"'Verily for the God-fearing are gardens of delight in the presence of their Lord.'

"There is also a parable of a rich man and his garden in Sura xviii," Ali continued, "which, as it is fully told in the Koran (the story I have told you is partly from the traditions), perhaps you would like to read yourself"; which we did, appreciating the fervour of the style and the truth of its moral teaching, summed up in the verse:

> "Wealth and children are the ornament of this present life; but good works which are permanent are better in the sight of thy Lord with respect to thy reward, and better with respect to hope."

Taïb's sister lives at M'cid, another of the seven villages of Biskra, having been married to a widower there for about a year. She fixed the hour of our visit rather early in the morning, so that Taïb, who always had to walk a mile from his home to the Sahara Hotel, had to be up betimes.

It is a delightful walk to M'cid. Passing the Jardin Landon, and entering the shade of the beautiful oasis on the edge of the desert, one passes down one of the prettiest of the many village streets.

On the left hand side of the road is a magnificent cypress tree, the immense height of which gives M'cid the distinction of having a landmark towering far above the palms and to be seen many miles away.

There is, too, in M'cid a primitive mill for crushing the oil out of the olives, which the men in charge will show and explain for a trifling reward.

The house we were visiting is a modest dwelling, built of the usual mud bricks, but we were received with a simple dignity which would have graced a castle.

Taïb's beautiful sister was very gaily arrayed in the multi-coloured clothes the Arab women admire, and she was wearing all her jewellery, which, although of such primitive workmanship, had a handsome effect. On her head was a bright scarf, her hair being looped, and the kerchief fastened with jewels and chains. There was a note of vivid green in her dress, which made a perfect harmony with her black hair and light olive complexion.

She introduced us to her stepdaughter, a girl of her own age, who carried an infant, being herself married, and living with her husband in the same house with her father and his wife and several smaller children.

The two women then sat down on the floor, side by side, behind a hand loom, to go on with their weaving, so that we might see it. They were making a very superior burnous; and the painful slowness of weaving each thread separately by hand brought a flash of recollection into my mind of a cotton factory

in Lancashire where every appliance invented by the skill of man was used to add to the speed of production. How remote all the noise and bustle, and the pressure of modern conditions, seemed in this small mud village, where Taïb informed us these women, like his mother, only worked at the loom when they wanted money!

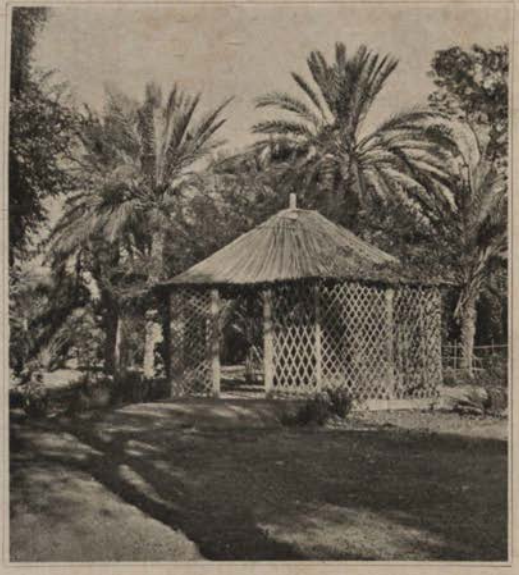
Having started from home at an early hour, Taïb had not yet broken his fast, a fact he whispered to his sister. At once she left the loom, and, asking us if we would kindly wait until she made cakes, she proceeded to prepare and cook her brother a very simple breakfast. She took a shallow wooden bowl, into which she put a handful of coarse flour, mixing it into a dough with olive oil.

A small girl, in the meantime, was blowing up the fire on the floor and feeding it with pieces of dried palm branches.

The dough was divided into balls, and each ball was taken into the palm of the right hand and pulled and pressed out until it was thinner than a pancake, when it was skilfully thrown on to a large flat piece of iron already heated over the fire. At the right moment it was most dexterously turned, and, when cooked, taken up and folded into about four folds, put into the bowl, and covered with a cloth until all were ready; when Taïb pulled out a mat, squatted on the floor, taking off his shoes (the right one, of course, first), and, with a soft "Bismallah!" ("In the name of Allah!"), sat down to his breakfast, as seen in the photograph.

My wife tasted the cakes, and found them very good.

I ventured tentatively to suggest to Taïb that perhaps his sister might not object to be photographed



BENI MORA, NEAR BISKRA, THE FRAGRANT MIMOSA GROVE



TAÏB, OUR GUIDE, BREAKFASTING IN HIS SISTER'S HOUSE (p. 92)

in her own house. The answer was characteristic of the Arab way of regarding things. She appeared to be shyly gratified, but after a few quiet words in Arabic with Taïb, he told us that she would gladly consent, but as her husband's small children were about, and might tell their father, she was afraid!

The house consisted of the same large general room and the dark cupboard bedrooms that we had seen before, but our pretty hostess had in some way become possessed of quite an interesting little collection of pottery, for which she had had shelves made, to hang in her own bedroom—a small and totally dark recess, to which we were proudly conducted by the light of a candle.

After distributing trifling gifts to the small children, we said good-bye, our hostess taking leave of us, of course, before we reached the door into the village street, as she was unveiled. And as we left we pronounced the usual benediction (which we had learned), as, on arrival, we had been careful to follow Taïb's example in the manner of approaching and entering an Arab house.

A day or two later my wife sent a small gift of remembrance to his sister by Taïb. Even this little act served to show how essentially different is the Arab mind from that with which we are accustomed to deal. The lad took the parcel with courteously gentle acknowledgment; then he opened it, felt the scarf between his finger and thumb, obviously to test if it was silk, and wrapped it up again. And the curious thing about the act was that it was entirely free from any consciousness of offence to us; and the motive puzzles us to this day.

CHAPTER V

A DAY AT SID IKBA

IN arranging to go to Sidi Okba we were amused by the way in which Ali insisted that we should get up early and take seats in the *diligence* which starts from the little street behind the Hôtel Royale at eight o'clock every morning. The return journey this way costs only two francs, while a private carriage, engaged for the day, costs twenty, a colossal sum which to the Arab mind puts anything but the *diligence* out of the question.* I must confess, too, of myself that—

> "Although he was on pleasure bent,
> He had a frugal mind."

It was a bitterly cold morning, with one of those terribly piercing dry winds from the north which are the rift within the lute that chants of Biskra's praise; and when Ali called for us at our hotel we found that he was wearing an extra burnous, of a heavy material and very ample folds, and he advised us to put on warm clothes, being especially anxious about my welfare, as he knew that I was suffering from a weak throat.

Everybody knows that the Arab will not in any circumstances put himself under the irksome pressure of what we call punctuality, a quality for which he neither has, nor desires, a name.

* "Guard us, Allah, from the sin of extravagance" is a usual Moslem prayer, I found.

We found the *diligence* standing at the regular starting-place, but with not the remotest sign about it that it was ever meant to move. Taking our cue from our Arab friend, we sat down under the veranda of the nearest café, and, over our steaming cups, prepared to wait the will of Allah—and the disposition of the driver—with growing signs of a benign philosophy we had certainly never known in England.

While thus engaged we were joined by a lad I knew as a street vendor of nuts, with whom I had had many pleasant chats, although, as he spoke only Arabic, the details of our respective languages were sealed to us. It is wonderful, however, with a little gift of imitativeness and some intuition, how easy it is to communicate with an Arab on simple topics. The lad, who to-day was quite handsomely attired in a great plum-coloured burnous, told me he was going to Sidi Okba to visit his mother and brother. I invited him to join us at coffee, which he did without the slightest embarrassment on either the part of Ali or himself; showing again how entirely absent among these people is any sense of the pride of class distinction.

While we waited, a poor idiot youth, clothed, this bitter morning, in nothing but a loose cotton shirt, whom I had often seen about the market quarter, came up to us and spoke to Ali in Arabic. Ali invited me to offer the lad a five-franc piece; and, as I hesitated, he took from my hand the silver coin, which, however, the beggar emphatically refused. Ali then gave him a sou, which he took, running gleefully off to get with it a piece of bread for his breakfast. Ali laughingly told us that he was a "Juif marabout," and for years he had begged for sous, always refusing any other coin of whatever value.

I was amazed, knowing the intensity of the hatred and scorn which the Arabs have for the Jews, to observe the gentleness and consideration shown to this poor idiot lad. It was further proof of the sincerity with which the Moslems regard those who are bereft of reason (even when they are Jews) as being under the special care of God.

At last the driver of the *diligence* began to move, his sense of independence from the thrall of anything like an exact time-table having apparently been satisfied. We got into the rather ancient wagonette, with canvas covering; and when, half an hour behind time, it was finally decided to start, our two wiry horses set off in gallant style, which promised well for our fourteen miles' journey across the stony river-bed and along the desert road.

With the nut-seller, who attached himself to us, our own party consisted of four, while a sturdy Frenchman, in a rough corduroy suit, with an Arab friend, both carrying guns, completed the inside occupants of the *diligence*.

Without a word to them, Ali proceeded to describe these two men to us in French, neither side showing any embarrassment, for, apparently, as the Arab knows everything about his neighbours, he takes it for granted that his neighbours are as fully informed about himself.

They were mighty hunters. "Look at the eyes of this Arab—only hunters have that clear, steady gaze." (The Arab hunter smiled steadily at us as we made our observations as directed.)

"This French gentleman, who owns considerable property in Biskra—he once was proprietor of the Sahara Hotel—has such an intense love of the desert that he has practically become an Arab. He has just

been into Biskra for a day or two on business, and to buy ammunition; but, as usual, he is hurrying away from the town at the earliest moment to the desert beyond Sidi Okba. His home is a nomad's tent, where his Arab wife and children await him, and where he will take off the clothes he is now wearing, and put on the Arab dress which he so much prefers. His Arab friend is his constant companion, and together they hunt the gazelle with a skill which has made them famous."

With charming modesty the Frenchman assented to this account of himself.

"It is true that I have become an Arab," he said to my wife and me. "From early boyhood I could not resist the power which the desert has over me. My father tried everything he could think of to break me in this; he thrashed me, he starved me, he even sent me to Paris. But nothing could cure me of what was a passion of my soul. My happiness in this life is in the desert; and when I die I hope to go to the Paradise of the Arabs!"

"Are you not afraid in the desert? Isn't the silence and loneliness awful? Isn't it terrifying at night?" asked my wife.

"Madam," he answered, "I am never afraid in the desert. In Paris, at night, I am afraid; in the desert, never!"

"Can you tell us what the fascination is?"

"Oh! the desert is so—*free;* the good God is so near, and nothing of man's stupidity, and *badness,* stands between you and Him. You breathe the pure air, and walk under the glorious sky, and—and——" Further language failing him, he could sum up in only one word, "you are so—*free!*"

Ali and our boy companion now produced their

flutes, and for the first time we discovered that Ali was an accomplished player on the little reed from which such haunting airs are drawn.

First the boy played a line of an Arab chant, and Ali answered it in song. Then Ali would flute and the boy would sing. One song—the lay of a conquered tribe—would wail and cry until the sadness became almost unendurable (there is surely nothing so pathetic as the dirges of the Arabs); then the Arab impatience of the misery of mind, in which to that moment Ali had revelled, would break forth in a merry dance, in which both flutes would seem to vie with each other in joyousness of step and reel and coy retreat.

And then the vocal chant of one of the Psalms of Islam would wail forth again, flute answering voice, both in minor key, in such a way that one would think the solemn fervour of the Prophet's message must be irresistible. And again fun would succeed gravity, and there would be much laughter over a comic Arab song.

"To be with friends is to be happy," said Ali, when we remarked on his good-humour. Both he and the Arab boy seemed determined to entertain us—and no one who has not experienced it can understand *how* entertaining an Arab can be when he is making holiday.

By this time we had reached the open desert road, and the cruel wind was blowing full upon us. My throat was not taking kindly to the cold and the dryness.

Looking through the flap of our canvas covering, we saw coming towards us from the desert an enormous pillar of sand of great height, driven forward in the centre of a whirlwind.

Immediately the Arab lad made a sort of tent of

the spare folds of his burnous, and, putting it over my head, completely covered me with it, as a protection from the sand, which every Arab understands is hurtful to the throat.

In a low voice I heard him muttering to himself, "Hadīd! Hadīd!" repeated by Ali in French as "*Fer! Fer!*" (Iron! iron!) "Fer, tu es malheureux!" (Iron, thou art unlucky!) the Arab boy repeating it in his own tongue, "Hadīd! za mashum!"

The boy's explanation (which Ali translated) was that he was warding off from us the flight of evil genii of the desert which causes these sand storms.

These jinns—which also are responsible for waterspouts—are supposed to have a great horror of iron,* so that the mere mention of it renders them powerless.

The fluting ceased, for the first instinct of the Arab always is to cover his mouth, not alone from the whirling sand but even from a cold wind.

For nearly half an hour we drove through this storm, and all the time I was covered like a chick by the mother hen. Occasionally Ali would peep under my cosy wing, with a humorous remark, and the face of my protector would dive down now and then; once he pulled up the whole burnous—it was specially voluminous—to bring his own head into my tent, and, to cheer me, played on his flute the merry dance tune which is always heard in the cafés where there is native dancing.

* One of the Suras of the Koran (lvii) is entitled "Iron." "Dire evil resideth in it, as well as advantage to mankind"—seeming also to suggest that by its occult power "God may know who assisteth Him and His apostles in secret" (verse 25). Adam is said to have brought with him from Paradise five things made of iron—an anvil, a pair of tongs, two hammers, and a needle. Possibly the great usefulness of iron caused it to be venerated.

Once through the storm we could see the oasis of Sidi Okba standing out very clearly in the distance; and with song and flute, and light-hearted jest, our friends again bewitched the time, so that we arrived at the famous desert village without feeling any irksomeness from the long drive in the old-fashioned *diligence*—an ordeal which our European friends had declared would alone kill us, even if we were fortunate enough to escape the murderous designs of possible Arab fellow-passengers.

We alighted, however, with alacrity, and as we were accompanied by Ali, who is everywhere well known, the crowd of men and children who await the daily arrival of what is their mail conveyance, in the hope of capturing a "tourist," melted away from us.

Our boy friend—and this is a true touch of Arab character—having behaved with charming kindness on the journey, now, with genial confidence, expected me to pay the franc for his fare—which, of course, I did without hesitation.

We turned to receive the most cordial welcome of the Arab judge, who had come out to meet us, and in two minutes we were all sitting outside a Moorish café—the boy included—drinking coffee, as the first sign of the hospitality which was to be lavished upon us on this memorable day.

Sidi Okba is quite different from Biskra. It is built all of mud in the Arab style, for there is no French colony and no military garrison. All its streets are very narrow, and its shops are tiny dark holes; but it is full of colour and brightness, because all the commodities are spread out in the streets. And very brilliant the fruit and vegetables, the clothing stuffs, the red and yellow shoes, the shining kitchen utensils, look in the blazing sunshine.

To admit the picturesqueness of Sidi Okba one need not omit mention—as sentimental writers do—of the unrelieved horrors of the butchers' shops (would that their wares were *not* spread out in the streets), the pest of flies, and the primeval lack of sanitation, which to some squeamish people are each and all insupportable.

For ourselves, our squeamishness in the matter of certain primitive customs had deserted us some time since by a sort of easy natural process, and though we never liked the flies (we found one means of defence, that these pests never followed us into the shade), the butchers shops we were able to take for granted.

The streets are thronged with Arab men and boys, but there is less of alertness and brightness here than in Biskra. Indeed' a distinct air of sadness prevails, a kind of listless reflectiveness which makes the inhabitants seem more remote and unapproachable.

Sidi Okba is the religious centre, as Biskra is the trading capital, of the Ziban. It is the town to which the pious Moslems from all parts of the vast country are drawn on pilgrimage; I have even heard it said that at one time of the year, when religious fervour is specially stirred by the more important observances of Islam, there are not wanting signs of fanaticism in these serious-looking people.

Under an arcade near by in the street, and very prominently placed, were two funeral biers. I asked Ali if they were always kept there.

"Oh, yes," he said; "and it is right. When the Prophet was asked what purifies and cleanses a sullied heart, he replied, 'Remembering death and constantly reading the Koran.'

"In a religious village like Sidi Okba these things

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serve to remind men of the end of life and the world to come."

In company with the Arab judge and Ali, we went first, of course, to the great mosque, the centre of the town, the one cause of its being, the shrine of one of the greatest men of Islam, in the shadow of which men come to study and to pray—the tomb of Sidi Okba.

This is the oldest Mohammedan building in Africa, for it is the original burial place of that great warrior Okba ("Sidi" is the title of "Lord"), who, in the early enthusiasm of Mohammedanism, with a small army, conquered, in 680, the whole of Northern Africa from Egypt to Tangier, being eventually killed near this spot.

He was a man of contagious courage, and one of his passionate exclamations is preserved to this day. As he once urged his horse into the Atlantic surf, he cried, "By the great God, if I were not stopped by this raging sea, I would go on to the nations of the West, preaching the unity of Thy Name, and putting to the sword those who would not submit!"

Sidi Okba began his brilliant career as the barber of the Prophet.

All round about the mosque were rooms in which religious teaching was being given to boys and young men. As this teaching was entirely concerned with the learning of the Koran for recitation, the class-rooms seemed like so many humming nests of hornets—a comparison which our friends suggested as having been employed by the Prophet when he once paid a surprise visit in the night to his people, and, to his delight, found them repeating prayers.

In the wall at one end of the mosque there were

several small doors, just large enough for a human being to creep through, about five feet from the ground. These, Ali told us, were the lodging-places of students and pilgrims; and, in answer to his knocking, one of the doors was opened, and a youth peered out from the cupboard in which he had his lodging, and returned the pious greetings of our friends.

The precincts of the Moslem mosque, especially when, like this one, it is an object of pilgrimage, are always regarded as the resting-place for strangers and travellers; and it is an important point in the religious life of Islam to visit the tombs of great men to claim an interest in their intercessions.

As at other great tombs, there are endowments at Sidi Okba for students and pilgrims, and the leaving of legacies is believed to put one in good favour with the saint.

In the old days of warfare, when most of the men of a village like this would at times be called to battle, a certain number would be left behind "that they may diligently instruct themselves in their religion, and may admonish their people when they come back to them, that they may take heed to themselves." *

In the first days every healthy man went to war, with the result that the study of religion was entirely neglected, hence this rule became necessary to keep alight the fire of religious zeal; and it would be in such rooms about the mosque as we saw at Sidi Okba that these men would study.

Having put slippers over our boots—lent us by a man at the door—while our Arab friends put off *their* baboosh and walked in stockinged feet, we entered

* Sura ix, 123.

the sacred precincts of the mosque, a large covered court which ran round two sides of it.

A pretty little bird flitting freely about in the court attracted my attention—it was a house-bunting, so common in the mud villages—and we were told it was the pet of the marabout, with whom it was very tame.

Our Arab friends took much interest in the pretty creature, telling me that birds are often mentioned in the Koran. In one chapter the fable of Jesus breathing life into the little clay birds which He had played at modelling with other boys is referred to.*

In another Sura there is a story of a miracle which Abraham performed with birds to convince one (said to be the Devil in human form) who doubted that God could bring together at the resurrection the several parts of the corpse of a man which lay on the sea-shore, and had been devoured partly by wild beasts, by fishes, and birds.†

The Arab judge told Ali (who translated for us —it will be remembered that the judge spoke only Arabic) that Abraham, after asking God to show him how He would give life to the dead, took four birds—an eagle, a peacock, a raven, and a fowl—and minced the four bodies together, flesh and feathers, keeping the heads uninjured in his hand. Dividing the mass into four parts, he laid a part on four different mountains. Then he called the birds each by name, and immediately all the original parts flew together and joined the heads, and the birds were alive again.‡

Moslems believe that all kinds of birds (and many,

* Sura iii, 43. † Sura ii, 262.

‡ One of the many echoes of the Bible to be found in the Koran and traditions, I think.—Gen. xv, 9.

if not all, beasts) have a language by which they communicate their thoughts to each other. Solomon, they say, was taught the speech of birds, and was endowed with power over the genii—"a clear boon from God." *

In the interior of the mosque there is much rich colouring, and the tomb is finer than most, and was shown to us by our friends with much pride. Hanging on the outside of the walls of this small chapel (to give it an English name) which encloses the grave were pictures, containing, of course, no human or other figures, but crude representations, without any attempt at perspective, of the sacred Kaaba at Mecca, and of Mohammet's tomb at Medina, I believe.

This chapel, our friends told us, was only opened on one day of the year, and on that day it would not be wise for an "unbeliever" to enter even the outer courts of the mosque; to attempt to enter the chapel itself would be death.

Burton relates that in visiting a sacred tomb the guardian who took him made a great rattling with the keys before opening the door, the reason being that the souls of saints are fond of sitting together in spiritual concourse, and, as no profane eye must look upon the scene, it was proper to give warning of approach. Whether that is true or not, our Arab friends, who obviously regarded the tomb with great veneration in other ways, betrayed not the slightest delicacy in trying, with all an Arab's keenness of observation, to find for us a hole through which we might peep at the grave within, inviting us to go on to our hands and knees in order to catch a better glimpse of what (for we *did* see it) looked like a very simple sort of sarcophagus.

* Sura xxvii, 16.

In another way, however, I was to receive proof of their belief that the spirit of a great saint lingers round his tomb.

After a whispered consultation apart, Ali and his friend asked if we would care to join with them in a simple supplication at the shrine.

We agreed, and took our place with them, side by side, standing close to the tomb, with our faces towards it, while they showed us exactly how to form with our hands the cup upon our breasts.

Silently, for a minute, we prayed in that strangely impressive place, the only occupants of that silent church, in an attitude which was a sign of faith in an immediate answer. A simple petition—on our part that the God of Abraham would bless us and our friends with all good, and on theirs that, through the good offices of this saint, the great God would protect us all, and that (to our wonderment), if we did not meet again in this life, we might all meet in Paradise! And then together we drew the palms of our hands down our faces to absorb the blessing of our prayer.

It was all so simple, and so true; and, although we felt sure of the regard of these men, so utterly unexpected was it that they could link us to them in their religion in this way, that we could not help but be deeply impressed.

Afterwards the incident led to many an interesting talk, the gist of which I will give later, when I will try to show how such a thing could be possible as between sincere Moslems and Christians, none of whom thought for a moment of giving up the least point of their own faith.

The view from the minaret of this mosque is exceptionally fine, for the whole oasis, with its houses

and palms, is in sight, while on one side stretches away the desert, and on the other is the beautiful yellow range of the Aures mountains.

It is especially interesting to look down from a height like this, from the fact that so much of the life of the people of a purely Arab town is passed on the flat roofs of the buildings, and that the women are allowed to walk on the roofs.

With his eyes so much quicker than ours, Ali pointed out many details of family life on the different roofs, which would have escaped us. I noticed that he kept in the shadow and never appeared in the openings of the minaret, from which he could be seen himself by the people below, while his friend had altogether excused himself from coming up with us.

The reason for this is that the Arabs object very strongly to anyone—especially of their own countrymen—going into the minarets, from which they can be overlooked.

Afterwards I found that any Arab, whether friend or guide, who went to the village mosques with us would always, on some pretext, refrain from going up into the minarets. It is no uncommon thing, they said, to find that some mysterious person below has flung a stone at an Arab appearing in a minaret, and in some parts bullets are not unknown. So thorough is this dislike that in some parts of the Arab world a blind muezzin is preferred, and cases are known of blindness having been pretended by a man who thought he might get the office.

The muezzin was an office instituted by the Prophet, one of the most faithful of his early followers named Bilal, an Ethiopian, who had a fine voice, being the first man to be employed to summon, from

an eminence, the worshippers to prayer. Mohammet is reported to have said, "The callers to prayer may expect Paradise, and whoever serves in the office for seven years shall be saved from hell-fire." He must stand, when he calls, with his face towards Mecca, with the points of his forefingers in his ears. The call must under no circumstances be recited by an unclean person, a drunkard, a madman, or a woman.

Leaving the mosque, we were now ready for the Arab lunch to which we had been invited.

The judge had previously gone home to see that everything was prepared for our reception, and when we arrived at the door we had a very cordial welcome; and, while the kous-kous was being prepared, we were taken to our host's garden of fig and palm trees, where another charming young Arab, who was to join the party at lunch, was awaiting us.

"What will you drink? Water! You must not drink the water if you are not quite strong, as it comes from a mountain stream, and not from a well, like that of Biskra, so it is not good for Europeans who are at all delicate. Wouldn't I have wine?" The judge had come to me in the garden to ask.

This was the question which led me to a *faux pas*. I was very thirsty, the dry wind having parched my throat. I never drink wine, but it occurred to me, in an unfortunate moment, that if I *must* drink, the safest thing to take would be the simple wine of the country. Forgetting for a moment that, although the Mohammedan does not drink wine, his sense of hospitality would lead him to get some for a guest, however he might detest it himself, I said "Yes!"

At last we were summoned to the feast, which, as the day was now fine, was served on a green patch of ground in the garden near the door of the house.

Here a cloth was spread on the grass, round which we seated ourselves, a wooden spoon being handed to each one of us by an Arab servant—a man, of course—who then went into the house and brought out a large steaming dish, and placed it in the centre of our circle. The dish itself was of crockery, for it is unlawful for an Arab to eat out of anything of the nature of a silver or gold vessel.

I must mention here that we had not been invited to go over the threshold of the house (we had entered the garden by a door in the mud wall), and so had not met the wife and daughters of our host. Not knowing us as well as Ali did, he could not introduce us to them, and in any case the presence of Ali and the other Arab friend would have been enough to keep them strictly within doors.

What seemed to us the least agreeable restriction upon us with regard to the ladies of the family was that we were not able, unless we committed a rudeness to our host, even to ask about their welfare in any way, although we quite well knew that all the morning they must have been working very hard in preparing this meal for our entertainment.

Of course, when the meal had begun, we knew our last chance of seeing them was gone, for in no circumstances would an Arab woman venture to eat with a general party, for she may not even sit down to food with her own husband and sons without a very urgent invitation.

The steaming dish proved to be a thick brown *potage*, in which the Arabs delight, and which they pepper so much as to make it almost unbearable to English throats; and, as the point of this meal was that it was to be purely Arab, no modification had been made for our benefit. Great was the delight of

Ali and his friends at our spluttering over the first mouthful, which, when once swallowed, seemed to prepare the way, so that we were able to partake of what was a really delicious soup without further tears.

Having, of course, no plates, we all dipped into the general dish. There was a neatness, a reserve, and a daintiness about the way this was done by the Arabs that robbed this method of eating of every sign of rudeness.

After this doubly-hot soup I was wondering how we could cool our English throats, when the servant placed beside me a bottle of *vin ordinaire*. By this time I had realised that I had made a mistake in manners, but decided that it would be best now to take a little of the wine without comment. As I poured some into my glass I noticed the slight instinctive movement of the young Arab who sat on my right, as he drew back his burnous, lest a drop of the forbidden liquid should splash upon him. I then put the bottle out of sight on the ground behind my back.

We had imagined that kous-kous was a single dish, and that the Arabs lived almost entirely upon its one or two ingredients, but we were to learn that it consists—on ceremonial occasions—of three or even more courses.

The soup having been removed, a smaller dish of an entirely different nature was brought in. It contained a small amount of meat, cut up into little pieces, fried egg, also cut up, and—to my special gratification—a great many large raisins, the whole being prepared with olive oil, and spiced quite mildly and pleasantly.

Having retained our spoons, we again sat up close

to the dish and dipped in, our host and Ali pointing out delicate morsels and laughingly urging us to take them.

Ali, who was sitting on the other side of the circle, away from me, seeing my glass was empty, urged me to have more wine.

Turning for the bottle, there was delighted laughter at my surprise in finding that it had vanished.

Looking to Ali for explanation, he said, to the further delight of his friends:

"Sir, Sidi Okba does not like to see a good man drinking wine, and so he has taken it!"

Of course, I acquiesced in the saint's good offices, asking my wife—in English—if she had any idea of the means by which the great Sidi had performed the vanishing trick, only to find that, although she was sitting in the best place for observation, she had seen nothing of it.

The kous-kous proper now appeared, the national dish which is prepared daily in every house and tent in Arab lands. The name of this preparation is on every tongue; the beggar daily craves a sou to buy a portion of it, the well-to-do make all their engagements converge towards that magic hour at sunset when a silence falls upon every community as men leave their occupations to sit round the steaming pot containing it.

To-day we had a huge piled-up dish, the sight of which, after the two previous courses, almost dismayed us.

The great round basin had been first filled with a granulated semolina steamed until soft and free from liquid; in this, seasonable vegetables, cooked separately, had been placed; over the top was a layer of small white nuts, also steamed or boiled until

soft, and on the top of all were laid chops of boiled mutton.

The Arabs hailed the appearance of this course with joy. Our host helped himself first, and as Ali took a huge chop by the bone end into the fingers of his right hand he explained to us that he was eating much to-day, because on the journey home we should face the cold wind. "If I do nothing and am warm, I eat little."

It is difficult for Europeans, at first, to realise that it is an act of truest politeness on the part of an Arab to help himself to all food, and to eat, before serving his guests; but, as Ali afterwards explained, the intention of this is to show that he is offering his friends only what he esteems highly himself. In some cases the question of poison would not be absent, and then the custom gave confidence. From a similar motive he always enters a room before guests—to show that he will not ask you to go where he hesitates to go himself.

When they had each taken a chop in their fingers, we did the same; and I wish I could say we ate with anything like their daintiness, although we, using both hands, had the left one free to dip into the bowl, while they, of course, had to put down the chops when they wished to use their spoons.

They still showed every anxiety that we should have the choice bits of vegetable, to be found by probing into the mass of grain, and all the time they smilingly urged us to dig deep in order to bring up something specially good, showing us the way to success.

Ali now laughingly asked me if I did not want to drink.

"Take your wine," he said. "Sidi Okba, after all, does not like you to suffer from thirst."

I turned round, and there was the bottle!

The joke gave the greatest delight, which was increased when he played it off upon me a second time; and, notwithstanding that my wife and I were now awake to the possibility of a repetition, we still had not an inkling of how it was done.

I got a return for the joke a few days later. A friend had brought from London a trick cigarette-box for Taïb, which I borrowed. When I met Ali I showed him the box full, and asked him to have a cigarette. Closing the box, apparently in absent-mindedness, I handed it to him. When he opened it, it was empty.

"Ah!" I said in feigned surprise, "Sidi Okba does not like to see a good Arab smoke."

Ali saw the joke, of course, and was greatly delighted. His sharp eyes soon saw through the mechanism of the trick, and I was commissioned to send him a similar box from England on my return.

After the kous-kous we had delicious dessert. A large plate of orange-sections, a plate of the dates of Okba, and a bountiful supply of shelled walnuts. It was a culmination to a meal fit for a king, and when we had finished we gratefully joined in the Arab grace, in which thanks were ascribed to Allah.

The Arabs held the dish with both hands while they said grace, and then the servant poured out for them the one sole drink of water which it is their invariable custom to take.

Our friends now smoked, and there settled over our party that air of quiet reflectiveness and peace which sustains the most enjoyable sociability without the intervention of the spoken word. We sat there

for a long time in the sunshine, under the flecking shadows of the golden leaves of the vines and fig-trees, smiling with happiness.

The appearance of coffee woke Ali to a consideration of practical affairs, and he suggested that after a short walk through the village we ought to go to the *diligence* to secure our seats, for he knew that a good number of Arabs were intending to travel to Biskra by it that afternoon.

At the gate of the garden we said good-bye, with most cordial thanks, to our host, whose kindliness and hospitality, dispensed with such high courtesy, had given us greatest pleasure.

He shook hands with us in the Arab way, raising his own hand to his lips after releasing ours. It was in this way that I noticed an agate ring he was wearing, bearing an inscription in Arabic. It bore, he told me, a quotation from the seven wonderful verses of the Koran, which contain a marvellous description of Allah, His majesty and His providence, which, through Ali, he quoted to us with quiet dignity:

"God! there is no God but He; the Living, the Eternal;
"Nor slumber seizeth Him nor sleep; to Him belongeth whatsoever is in Heaven, and on Earth! Who is he that can intercede with Him but by His good pleasure?
"He knoweth what hath been before them and what shall come after them; and naught of His knowledge shall they comprehend, save what He willeth.
"His Throne is extended over the Heavens and the Earth, and the preservation of both is no burden to Him; and He is the High, the Mighty."*

* Sura ii, 256.

These verses, he said, were often worn (in many forms) by Moslems.

It is related that Mohammet's son-in-law, Ali, heard the Prophet say in the pulpit that the person who repeated this verse—called the Throne—after every prayer is only prevented from entering Paradise by life. Whoever says it when he goes to his bedchamber, God will keep him in safety, together with his house and the house of his neighbour.

When we reached the *diligence* we found our host and his young friend there, to see us comfortably seated, and again wish us good-bye. The vehicle was apparently already full of white-robed Arabs, but after much discussion (the explosive nature of the language always makes even the most ordinary argument sound like a violent quarrel) my wife was seated next to the driver, I was squeezed in between the Arabs on one of the inside seats, and Ali sat on the floor.

The return journey was only memorable for the force and the bitterness of the wind. The amiability of the "murderous thieves" of Arabs, and their child-like curiosity about my camera, my rings, my watch, my fountain pen—all of which, to their delight, I entrusted to them without any hesitation—were no surprise to me. How could one be afraid of men who, at the hour of the first evening prayer, when the driver stopped and himself alighted, all got down to go through their devotions, with a fervour and entire absence of self-consciousness of which in our own worship we know little?

Arrived safely at Biskra, we made our adieux to Ali, with many expressions of thanks for all his good services.

Awaiting us was the gentle Taïb, who courteously

listened to all our enthusiastic descriptions of our excursion, but added no word of agreement or approval.

On being pressed, he told us that he did not think it suitable for an English lady and gentleman to travel in the *diligence*.

But the gist of Taïb's grievance really was that, in going with Ali, we had deprived a guide of a day's occupation.

From which suggestion we took the hint, both for Ali's sake and Taïb's, always in the future to engage a guide when there was any question that Ali might gratuitously be serving us in this capacity. We felt that we must not subject our friends to the enmity of anyone, for the accounts we heard of Arab rage when once roused—and it flares sometimes in an instant—by a supposed grievance were alarming.

The objection to the *diligence* for people of our description was, too, perfectly genuine. We never afterwards mentioned the word to Taïb without exciting signs of his disapproval, and we heard that in his quiet way he held us up in this matter to other "patrons" as an awful warning.


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CHAPTER VI

ABOUT MORTALITY AND IMMORTALITY IN THE MOHAMMEDAN FAITH

AN Arab funeral always excites great curiosity in the minds of visitors; and on no subject is the Moslem so reticent as on things belonging to death, the grave, and his beliefs about a future life.

The first surprise to a European in meeting a funeral is to see the whole cortège running to the cemetery. Why is this? he asks. Why is the body buried without a coffin? Why do Arab men, who happen to meet the funeral in a casual way (even our guides would do this), show such anxiety to be allowed to help in carrying the bier?

It is to answer these, and a hundred other questions, that I am writing this chapter, which is the outcome of research as well as inquiry—the latter from our good friends in Algeria, and the former from books written by Moslem as well as English and French authors.

The Arab people are in pitiful state when sickness overtakes them, for, without doctor or nurse, there seems little for them to do but to steal away, as animals do, and quietly die. Like little children, if they are out of health they sink into a gentle acquiescence, refusing food and desiring to be left alone.

Often during our winter in Biskra we came across a melancholy figure huddled up in an out-of-the-way

corner of the gardens, which turned out to be one of our young friends—his animation and gay temper all gone—who answered our inquiries in a whisper, without sign of interest or hope.

The Arab boy who fluted and sang so merrily to us on the way to Sidi Okba was one of these cases, the more pitiful to us because we could not understand even the few words he could muster up spirit enough to speak to us.

To feel the pulse, look at the tongue, administer quinine or some other simple remedy, and, if possible, make such arrangements as would secure shelter and rest, that was all it was in one's power to do.

There are ancient medicine-men amongst the Arabs, but they are much like the witch-doctors of old.

If the case was one of accident, or became serious in any way, it was open to us to ask the help of the White Sisters, who have a small French hospital, and are very kind to the Arabs, when they are willing to submit—which is seldom—to their ministrations.

The usual native remedy for wounds is butter mixed with henna, the peel of an onion, and some resin. If one of the old medicine-men is employed, the fee is payable in advance, but payment for the medicines is only made if the patient recovers; if he dies the "doctor" cannot recover the price of the compounds.

It was rarely, however, that we heard of the illness of the natives, so fatally quiet and submissive to the will of Allah are they under affliction.

For some diseases they have great belief in the hot mineral springs which abound in Africa, the

Hammam-es-Salahin—or hot sulphur springs near Biskra—called by the French, *Fontaine Chaude*, being looked upon as a cure for almost every disease which is not of such a nature as to make the three-mile journey in the rattling one-horse tramcar impossible.

In some cases faith is put in a pilgrimage to a famous tomb; and, of course, they almost all have a deep belief in the potency of the charms made up by a favourite marabout.

Bleeding is very common, and the women are acquainted with the use of a few simples, and use herbs for the cleansing of wounds. As a dressing, they sometimes use aromatic herbs, pounded and sprinkled with salt or pepper; occasionally this may hasten a cure, but I should imagine that sometimes it might cause such irritation as would effectually prevent healing, and might probably hasten dissolution.

In fevers and other severe cases the onlookers are so petrified with their own helplessness that they do nothing beyond tying a piece of parchment round the patient's neck, on which verses from the Koran are written; giving no medicine whatever. Death, of course, is very frequently the result of neglect.

Amputation is resorted to very rarely indeed. There was one poor man in Biskra who had lost a leg, but I found that he was a soldier at the time it was cut off, and his protests were ignored by the army doctors. He was now regarded by the Arabs with something of aversion. They prefer death, on religious grounds, to the chance of recovery with a limb gone. In denying this, Lieut.-Colonel Villot is wrong.

"The body that we hold from Allah," they say,

"does not belong to us any more than the life with which He has animated us, and we ought not to dispose of one or the other. It is a sacrilege on which our days should not depend, for they are counted beforehand, and Allah has given to man neither the right to abridge nor the power to increase their number."

From which it will be seen that suicide, too, is contrary to their belief—indeed, it is expressly forbidden in the Koran.* It is sinful, even, to wish for death.

As for death, when it comes, "What does death matter? What is written is written. If I must die of a wounded limb, I will keep it and die as Allah made me!"

A pestilence is regarded as a punishment sent from Allah; and, from the monuments in the French cemetery at Biskra commemorating the deaths of soldiers who had died in two visitations of plague, one would suppose this desert town had been especially deserving of chatisement.

A pestilence—said Mohammet—is also an occasion of martyrdom, for the Moslem who abides in the place where it is, and dies of it, enjoys the special reward reserved in Paradise for all martyrs. The Moslem may not enter a place stricken with the plague, but he must not flee out of a place because of it.

The souls of martyrs, says one of the "Fathers" of Islam, dwell in the crops of green birds, which have liberty to fly wherever they please in Paradise and to feed on all the delicious fruits to be found there.

To visit the sick is a religious duty, for the

* Sura iv, 33.

Prophet said, "When a Moslem visits a sick brother, he gathers the fruits of Paradise from the time he leaves home until he returns."

If a man is thought to be dying, he makes his will and appoints his executor. When the end is near, any learned reader of the Koran is sent for to repeat, in a distinct voice, the thirty-sixth Sura, which was regarded by the Prophet as the heart of the Koran. The reading of it to a dying person is thought to give to his spirit a peaceful concentration on holy things. Such music as the reading of this chapter makes is said to resemble that which Allah created for the delight of the spirit which he commanded to enter the body of Adam, and so it has power to tranquillise the soul. The short Moslem Confession of Faith is also recited by those present, and, if possible, by the sick person. If, however, a dying man has not strength to repeat his creed, he may hold up the forefinger of the right hand, or it may be held up for him, while the confession is said.

There is a beautiful passage of consolation and comfort which is sometimes read to the sick and the dying by friends other than the professional reciters, as it is not prescribed. It gives praise to

" the Lord of Worlds,
Who hath created and guided me,
Who giveth me food and drink;
And when I am sick He healeth me,
And who will cause me to die and again quicken me,
And who, I hope, will forgive me my sins in the Day of Judgment.
My Lord! bestow on me wisdom and join me to the just,
And give me a good name among posterity,
And make me one of the heirs of the garden of delight;
And forgive my father, for he was one of the erring;

And put me not to shame on the day when mankind shall be raised up,
The day when neither wealth nor children shall avail,
Save to him who shall come to God with a sound heart,
When Paradise shall be brought near the pious." *

There is a fully prescribed ceremony of washing the dead. If the deceased, or a pious friend, has made the pilgrimage to Mecca, and has brought back water from the holy well of Zam-Zam there—the identical spring from which Hagar and Ishmael drank in the wilderness—this should be used, and the grave-clothes should also be washed in it.

Some pilgrims to Mecca make a trade of the sale of linen for this purpose which has been washed at the well in Mecca, and will secure peace of soul after death. It can always be purchased in the holy city.

Possibly at the hour of death the deceased has swallowed a few drops of this water, which has a brackish taste, and this would give him power to resist the Devil, who, at the moment when a dying man is parched with thirst, stands by and offers a bowl of pure and sparkling water, the price of the departing soul. A subtle temptation, indeed, in the scorching desert!

The burial clothes are like those worn in life, but they must be of white only, and new. Often, in going round the market, small boys would point us to one of the sewing-men, who was busily engaged on clothes for a departed Arab; the funeral taking place within twenty-four hours of death.

A coloured cloth may be spread over the bier—in Biskra the one generally used was bright red and green.

* Sura xxvi, 77-90.



MINARET OF A VILLAGE MOSQUE



AN ARAB FUNERAL

No coffin is used, and the simple nature of the bier can be seen in my photograph. On the morning of burial, notice is sent to the men at the cemetery, and they make a rough beginning of the grave, which, however, is not completed until the arrival of the cortège.

It is considered a very meritorious act to carry the bier, and men will beg of the bearers to be allowed to take their place for a short time. Amongst some Moslems there is a tradition that no one should precede a corpse, as it is the office of angels to go before. But this is not recognised at Biskra. The bearers run to the grave, for the Prophet said—in the Traditions—that this is right, enabling the good person to arrive soon at happiness; if the deceased is a bad man, it is well to put wickedness away from one's shoulders as quickly as possible.

The funeral procession should always be on foot, for Mohammet reproved certain men who went on horseback: "Have you no shame, since God's angels go on foot and you go upon the backs of quadrupeds?"

To attend a funeral is regarded as a righteous deed, and the Arabs pay great respect to the obsequies not only of their own race, but of Christians and Jews.

On the way to the cemetery the men chant from the Koran. The sound of this mournful singing when it came upon us suddenly one day from one of the narrow lanes leading from Vieux Biskra into the main road, by the side of which is the cemetery, was startlingly weird.

"It is a funeral," said Taïb, when we first caught the sound; and, while I quickly adjusted my camera, the sensitive lad turned away, his hands over his

ears, so that he might not see the sad procession or hear the mournful chant.

Arrived at the cemetery, the bier, with its burden, is placed on the ground some distance from where the grave has been partly dug; and by it, with his face turned away from the grave, sits the chief mourner, depressed and motionless.

Pitiful indeed was the figure of a father, as he sat thus by the body of his little son, when we passed the cemetery one day.

Some of the friends will go to the grave and help to complete it; others will form a group by the side of the small mosque (or kouba), and will rapidly chant the Koran.

If the family of the deceased is rich, special religious men will be engaged, and, by beginning the chanting of the Koran at five different places at the same time, the whole book will be got through. There is great comfort to the bereaved in this service. In what country is not the possession of ample means some sort of alleviation on such occasions?

Over on the other side of the cemetery a very sad group of mourners, who have come separately, will sit, consisting of the women of the family, who weep and wail, sometimes in a heartrending way—as did the mother of this little boy—under their veils; the while the little children, all unconscious of the meaning of the tragic commotion, run in and out in play, the most venturesome sometimes going over to the grave to see how the work is progressing.

The grave is dug at first of double width, but when it is a certain depth (I think about two feet) the remaining part, being the narrow grave itself, is made the size only of an ordinary grave. There is thus a wide step down into the grave, and as the

body must be laid in a hollow space, unbaked bricks are placed across the narrow grave from this step, and then covered with palm branches. The narrow part of the grave must be dug on the Mecca side of the opening, and must be of sufficient depth for a person to sit upright in it.

The primitive nature of all the arrangements is shown by the fact that more than once I saw a person who was helping to dig a grave, being uncertain of the exact proportions, run over to the body, unwind one end of his turban, and take measurements with it, not, of course, completely baring his head.

After the chanting, the people seat themselves on the ground and raise their hands in silent prayer on behalf of the soul of the deceased. Then a friend, addressing the chief mourner—who has come up to the group from his lonely vigil—says, "It is the will of Allah!" to which he replies, "I am well pleased with the will of Allah!" Permission is then given by him to the friends to retire: "There is permission to depart!"

The procession now goes with the body to the grave, if the signal (sometimes a call) has been given that it is ready. Three or four men stand down on the step and take the body, which they place in the grave with their hands, the head to the north, and on its side so that the face is turned towards Mecca, the right palm beneath the right cheek. All the bands of the clothes are loosed, to make freedom of movement possible. At this point an angel, it is believed, gives the deceased notice of the coming of the two examiners.

After the burial the people recite the first Sura of the Koran in the name of the deceased:

"Praise be to God, the Lord of all creatures!
The most merciful, the King of the Day of Judgment!
Thee only do we worship, and to Thee do we cry for help!
Guide Thou us in the right way,
In the way of those to whom Thou hast been gracious,
The way of those with whom Thou art not angry, and who go not astray."

When they have gone forty paces from the grave they repeat the Sura, for at this moment they believe two angels of a terrible appearance, named Monker and Nakîr, come to examine the departed as to his faith and life, for which purpose the deceased comes to life again, and is commanded to sit up in the hollow space provided.

If the answers are satisfactory, the body is suffered to rest in comfort and peace, for the grave will magically expand in length and breadth, and a light will be given for the grave, and as they depart the angels will say, "Sleep!"

If wicked and faithless, the angels will beat him (on the temples with iron maces, it is thought by some) till he roars out so loudly that every living thing—except men and genii—can hear him from east to west.

The angels then press the earth on the corpse, and it is believed (in a figurative sense, say many, chiefly of the cultured class to which our friend Ali belongs) that the sins become live, venomous beasts, which trouble the deceased until the Resurrection.

During this time the mourners are engaged in distributing food to the poor, as a propitiatory offering to God, in the name of the deceased. At intervals the men and lads go to the tombs of marabouts near

by and kneel in silent prayer with an apparent intensity of devotion and fervour. I wondered if they were using the beautiful prayer which Burton heard used before the tomb of the Prophet:

> "O Allah! O Safeguard of the Fearful, and Defender of those who trust in Thee, and Pitier of the weak, of the poor and the destitute! Accept us, O Beneficent! And pardon us, O Merciful! and receive our penitence, O Compassionate! and have mercy upon us, O Forgiver! For, verily, none but Thou canst remit sin! Of a truth, none but Thou alone knowest the hidden, and veilest man's transgressions! Veil Thou our offences, and pardon our sins, and broaden our breasts."

On the third day it is usual for relatives to visit the grave and to recite selections from the Koran; when there is wealth, learned men are again engaged to recite the whole book.

Mourning is restricted to three days, during which friends and relatives must visit and console the bereaved family and offer up prayers for the dead. A widow must mourn for four months and ten days. It is the duty of mourners to abstain from perfumes, and not to wear ornaments; the garments they wear must be old and faded.

Vocal lamentation and immoderate weeping for the dead are forbidden by the Prophet, but are nevertheless a common custom amongst all Moslems. I saw a group of women at the cemetery at Biskra in a very paroxysm of loud weeping, and on another day I heard distinct wailing.

Mohammet said, "Whatever is from the eyes (tears) and whatever is from the heart (sorrow) are from God; what is from the hands and tongue is

from the Devil. Keep yourselves and your women from wailing, which is the noise of the Devil."

The examination in the grave is suggested (though not plainly ordered) in the Koran; there is an express warrant, however, for it in a tradition of Mohammet, and at Biskra it is firmly held. One sect denies it, but all Moslems believe that the dead undergo some punishment in the grave, whether they are believers or infidels.

A curious point about the examining angels is that they are said—as a feature of their repulsive appearance—to have *blue eyes*. I could not understand this until I found that the hatred of blue or grey eyes has been traditional amongst Moslems since the Prophet's day.

In Sura xx of the Koran he makes Allah say, "We will gather the wicked together on that day (the Resurrection) having grey eyes" *—the idea of the word translated *grey* being "leaden," or grey to greyish-blue.

Almost every Arab has brown eyes, and any deviation from this colour is pointed out as remarkable. In Biskra we met only one Arab with blue eyes, a fact to which Ali at once called our attention. This deviation from the national type appears more often amongst the Kabyles.

It is stated that this hatred arose from the fact that the early enemies of the Arabs, the Greeks, usually had blue eyes. For the same reason, red hair is hated. Of a person they abominate the Arabs will say, "He has a black liver, blue eyes, and red whiskers." It is curious that with us to say a man has a *white* liver is a term of opprobrium.

* The word may also mean "dull" eyes, "squint-eyed," or "blind" of a suffusion.

The graveyards are much neglected; indeed, one of the Moslem sects think it meritorious to neglect their graves, believing it to be in accordance with the wishes of the Prophet. The erection of tombs with baked bricks or with mortar is forbidden, and also the placing of inscriptions. At Biskra the graves are made strictly according to the general belief of what is permitted—a mound of mud, like a camel's back, with unbaked bricks set at the head.

In some places—Algiers, for instance—inscriptions on headstones are put up, and even in Biskra the graves of marabouts are made of plaster, and, unlike the mounds, are kept in repair. At one end of them a hollowed cone is made, and in this, on Fridays, candles are lighted and incense burned.

On some of the graves—there are sadly too many of these—two bricks are placed on end, leaning together, indicating that a woman has died in childbirth. Poor women! In this land of neglect and suffering their natural burdens are more than doubled. It was evidence of a kind heart in the Prophet, I think, that he promised to every woman dying in this way those special rewards of a martyr to which I have previously referred, so that it has become a glorious death, and is even envied.

An Arab cherishes the idea of being buried in the same place as his fathers. On the field of battle Arab soldiers have been seen to expose themselves to a murderous fire in order to bring away their dead for burial.

Many and curious are the beliefs of Islam about immortality. There is a state between death and the Resurrection into which men enter when their souls have been separated from their bodies by Azraël, the angel of Death, who performs this office

with gentleness to the good and violence to the wicked.

Much discussion has taken place amongst Moslems as to the resurrection of the body, some believing that only the spirit will appear on the Great Day. The usual opinion is that both body and soul will rise. The Prophet taught that, while the earth may absorb most of the body, there is one bone that will be reserved—the coccyx, the last bone of the spinal column—on which the whole frame will be rebuilt. Even failing this, however, the Koran teaches clearly that the God who made man can remake him. However, in one tradition Mohammet is said to have taught that this bone will remain in the earth as seed, and after a forty days' rain, which Allah will send, all human bodies will spring forth from the coccyx like plants.

The Day of Resurrection is known alone to Allah, but there are various signs which must be fulfilled before the time is ripe for the final judgment, all of which are enumerated. They are particularly interesting to Christians and Jews, as they echo much that is suggested both in the Old and New Testaments and in the Talmud.

There will be an appearance of the Beast, the coming of Antichrist, certain wars, eruptions, odoriferous winds, and so on. Also it is firmly believed that Jesus Christ will descend again to the earth, near Damascus. He will destroy Antichrist, and under Him there will be peace and plenty on the earth; all men will dwell together in love and unity, and the lion will indeed lie down with the lamb, and a little child shall literally lead them. At His death, Jesus will be buried in the grave reserved for Him, close to Mohammet and his friends at Medina.

The Resurrection will include genii as well as men; and also animals. Those animals, say some writers, which have suffered from horned brutes will take vengeance on their enemies until satisfaction is given to the injured. The Creator will then command them to return to dust, at the sight of which wicked men will exclaim, "Would to Allah that we might become dust, alas!"

For the genii, according to some tenets, a similar fate is reserved; while others claim that the believing genii will receive a higher favour than being turned into dust, a place near to Paradise being assigned to them, where they will be happy, although not admitted to heaven itself. It is universally held that the wicked and unbelieving genii will be punished in hell. The Moslems believe that certain animals —a dog is particularly mentioned *—will be taken to Paradise.

The first direct sign of the Resurrection will be the blast of a trumpet, which will be sounded by Israfîl, three times—the blast of *consternation*, of *examination*, of *resurrection*. Terrible indeed will be the first blast, for all the earth shall be troubled and tremble at it, although Allah will exempt some souls from the terror of that day. At the second blast all creatures in heaven and earth, whom Allah does not exempt, shall die, nothing surviving except the Creator alone, with Paradise and Hell, and their inhabitants, and the Throne of Glory. The Angel of Death, having finished his work, shall be the last to die.

After an interval of forty years the last sound of the trumpet shall be heard. Israfîl shall blow it, and, with Gabriel and Michael, call all men to judg-

* Sura xviii, 17.

ment. While mankind is waiting for judgment, the wicked will suffer appalling heat from the nearness of the sun, but the good will stand in the shade of the Throne.

At length God will appear, coming in the clouds, surrounded by angels, for the Judgment, with the Prophet as Intercessor. The books will be produced in which the guardian angels of men have recorded their actions; and the prophets who have been sent to warn and admonish mankind will be asked to bear witness against those who have rejected their message, the chief prophets being Noah, Abraham, and Jesus.

Then every person will be examined as to his life, the chief points of inquiry being those which were stated by Mohammet—how they spent their time; by what means they acquired their wealth, and how they spent it; of their bodies, how they exercised them; of their talents, of intellect, and opportunities of study, what use they made of them.

"God will be swift in taking an account," says the Koran many times, and Moslems believe those words to indicate that this part of the judgment will be quickly over.

A book will be delivered to each person, in which all the actions of his life have been entered. The good will take their book in the right hand with great pleasure, but the bad will be obliged to extend the left hand to take the book, when that hand will be bound behind their backs, the right hand being tied up to their necks.

There are many curious beliefs about the details of the Judgment, especially those concerning the two colossal scales in which men's actions are weighed.

The Judgment ended, the souls who have deserved Paradise will go to the right hand, and those who are

destined for hell to the left. But all must pass through the strange trial of crossing *al Sirât*, the Bridge. The Bridge crosses over the pit of Hell, and is described as being finer than a hair and sharper than the edge of a sword.

One sect of Islam (the Motazalites), whom one might call the "New Theologists," reject this and other articles of faith which put a great strain on their credulity; but the Arabs at Biskra believe implicitly in the Bridge, as I proved again and again in my questions, saying that their Prophet had told them of it, and he never lied.

On each side the Bridge is beset with briars and hooked thorns. In spite of every difficulty and obstacle, the good will pass with ease over it, directed into Paradise by a bright light. In darkness (for the light will be extinguished) the wicked will struggle in vain to walk along this perilous way, and when they have fought with its difficulties and tried to free themselves from its entanglements they will fall headlong into Hell, which is gaping beneath.

Those who have safely passed the Bridge will, before entering Paradise, refresh themselves by drinking at the great and beautiful lake of the Prophet, which is supplied from one of the streams of Heaven. The water is pureness itself and of fragrant odour (sweeter than musk), and round it are set as many cups as there are stars in the firmament. Those who drink of it shall never thirst again.

On entering Heaven the saints will say: "We take up our abode at the command and through the mercy of Allah alone, who ruleth all things, past and future and present, and who is not forgetful of the works of His servants."

Much has been written about the materialistic and

sensual Paradise which Mohammet has pictured in the Koran. There is indeed a great deal to justify this, especially if to all that the Prophet says about it in the Book the particulars given in the Traditions are added. The magnificence of its furnishing, as well as its luxurious amenities, are such as appeal to the Arab and other Eastern races, and must always be congenial to an unenlightened and carnal generation. The fruits grown there are luscious and abundant; the very stones are pearls and jacinths; the ground is made of finest wheat flour, scented with musk or (as others say) saffron.

There are gorgeous buildings of gold and silver, and the trunks of the trees are of gold, the boughs bending spontaneously to the hand of those who would gather their fruits. Any fruit desired is immediately presented, or, if flesh is chosen, birds ready dressed will be served without delay. Streams of water will flow on every hand; as well as rivers flowing, some with milk, some with honey, some with wine.

Fountains also are promised, their pebbles of rubies and emeralds, their beds of musk; the climax being reached by a description of certain special gardens of pleasure, numbering at least a hundred, all offering different degrees of felicity, the very meanest of which would be entirely overwhelming in its delights had not Mohammet declared that in order to qualify the blessed for their full indulgence and enjoyment Allah would increase the abilities of each soul a hundredfold.

A great deal of fun, too, has been made of the houris of Paradise, the beautiful damsels with black eyes, who will wait upon the faithful there. Of purest creation, these fragrant and lovely creatures

are of such modesty that they are secluded from public gaze in pavilions of hollow pearls.

Beautiful youths, too, will attend to the wants of the saints. And two angels will meet them at the gate of Paradise, bearing the presents sent by Allah; one of these angels will clothe them with garments of Paradise, and the other will put a ring on their fingers, bearing an inscription referring to the happiness of those in Heaven.

The suggestion of a great deal of this voluptuousness is found alone in the Traditions, and although it must not be supposed that the Paradise of the Koran is one of spiritual happiness to beings who have outgrown sensual and earthly enjoyments, there are suggestions in the Book that the highest joy of Paradise, reserved for the purest souls, shall be to be nearest the Throne of God:

> "On that day shall faces beam with light
> Looking towards their Lord." *

I think it is not claiming too much to say that Mohammet may have caught a glimpse of the truth that spiritual joy might raise those who had attained to the highest state from the need of material indulgence. Those "who approach near unto the divine presence" shall drink water only, pure and unmixed, while others, on a lower plane, drink wine.† It is reserved for those whose lives have made them examples of piety and virtue to "approach near unto God":

> "They that were foremost on earth—the foremost still.
> These are they who shall be brought nigh unto God,
> In gardens of delight." ‡

* Sura lxxv, 22, 23. † Sura lxxxiii, 28. ‡ Sura lvi, 10.

The great punishment shall be "to be shut out from their Lord on that day."* One of the joys of Paradise shall be that of peace; "there shall be no vain discourse, but only the salutation, 'Peace! Peace!'"† of which Carlyle said "the thing all rational souls long for, and seek vainly here below as the one blessing."

Not only is peace promised in Paradise, but perfect amity and brotherhood, which to the Arabs will be a great gift, for they cherish friendship and simple habits of sociability very dearly.

To turn one's back upon a person is a mark of contempt and indignity quite as conclusive, if not as violent, as to strike a man on the head, especially with a slipper or a pipe stick. To strike him with a whip would mean nothing in comparison. In Paradise, as a sign of perfect social happiness, they shall sit on couches face to face. The angels' greeting as they enter into the bliss of heaven will be:

"'Enter ye therein in peace, secure'—
And all rancour (grudges) will we remove from their bosoms.
They shall be as brethren, sitting over against one another on couches." ‡

I have often seen it stated that but for the houris there is no mention in the Koran of women in the Moslem Paradise; its joys for men are described, but no word is written of the pleasures it may have in store for women. This is so, and the fact is a striking revelation of the attitude of the Prophet's mind towards women; in this I imagine he was no whit better, or worse, than any other Arab writer of his time. It must be remembered, too, that the Arab

* Sura lxxxiii, 15. † Sura lvi, 25. ‡ Sura xv, 46, 47.

man trains himself to refer to womenfolk as little as possible. But, notwithstanding this, it is made perfectly clear all through the Koran that those who do right, whether male or female, shall inherit Paradise.

This point is so obvious that if it were not for the almost universal misapprehension which I have found on the subject of the women of Islam and their religion, I would not do more than mention it. But when I say that I heard a man with a reputation as a theological scholar state in Biskra that women were not so much as mentioned in the Koran, I think I may be justified in insisting that there is abundant proof to the contrary. The following, one of many passages to the same effect, is conclusive:

> "Truly the men who resign themselves to God, and the women who resign themselves, and the believing men and the believing women, and the devout men and the devout women, and the men of truth and the women of truth, and the patient men and the patient women, and the humble men and the humble women, and the men who give alms and the women who give alms, and the men who fast and the women who fast, and the chaste men and the chaste women, and the men and women who oft remember God: for them hath Allah prepared forgiveness and a rich recompense." *

The faithful Moslem is charged to protect and succour believing women,† and it is distinctly promised by the Prophet "to those who have believed, whose offspring have followed them in the faith, will we again unite in Paradise their offspring"—a message revealed to him by the Spirit in answer to

* Sura xxxiii, 35.

† Sura lx, 10.

his first wife's question as to the fate of her children who had died. I have already mentioned that certain women will obtain the special rewards reserved for martyrs.

Between heaven and hell there is a wall or partition broad enough for certain beings to dwell upon it, but not broad enough to prevent the inhabitants of the regions on both sides from talking to each other. The writers of Islam greatly differ as to who are the beings consigned to this wall, called *al Arâf*. Some say it is a place of honour for prophets and patriarchs or the most highly meritorious of the martyrs. This does not seem probable in view of the special delights provided in the gardens of Paradise for those entitled to the greatest reward.

Others think it is a place reserved for those whose good and evil deeds are exactly equal, so that they deserve neither reward nor punishment. On the wall they will be able to perform such good works in praise and worship and adoration of Allah that they will eventually be admitted to Heaven.

Others hold the curious belief that on this wall will be found those sons who have gone to war without their parents' leave. For going to war and losing their lives for Islam they are martyrs, but for disobedience to parents they must in justice be punished, this being a serious fault with a Moslem. And so while they lose early admission to Heaven, they also escape hell. But as there are seven heavens, of differing degrees of bliss, one might suppose that the first heaven would be a suitable place in which to start the work of qualification for the upper heavens and for Paradise itself.

There now remains the question of the Mohammedan hell, in picturing the woes and the torments of

which the imaginativeness of the East has left nothing unexpressed.

I will not enter upon the harrowing details. Suffice it to say that, as there are seven heavens so there are seven hells, prepared for different classes of the banished, the lowest hell being reserved for hypocrites who falsely professed some religion when on earth. There will be the torments not only of heat but of cold; the greatest misery will be that of despair.

But true believers in God and His Prophet will, at the intercession of Mohammet, be released from torment and admitted into heaven after a full expiation of their sins, tradition putting the period of detention at no less than 900 years and no more than 7,000.

On leaving hell the redeemed ones will wash away all trace of that awful region by immersion in "The River of Life," from which they will emerge whiter than pearls.

The Devil, called by Mohammet Eblis, or Despair, does not differ much from the Evil One of the Bible. He was once one of those angels nearest the presence of God. He fell because when God created Adam he refused to pay homage to man at the command of the Creator.

From all this it will be seen that mankind are to be rewarded or punished hereafter in the most exact degree according to their conduct in this present life—the scales shall weigh them with a justness, taking note of infinite detail in their good as in their bad deeds.

But here again Mohammet seems to have caught a glimpse of a nobler conception of justice than that of mere weight and measure. All through the Koran

there are faint flashes of illumination from those grander truths which are to be found ahead of the revelation which Mohammet experienced—of mercy and compassion, of self-sacrifice, and of an infinite pity and tenderness towards those whose earthly lives are set on so low a plane as severely to limit their opportunities of attainment and to preclude them from the chance of happiness.

It is a crude expression of one of these beautiful truths in the teaching of Christ to declare, as Mohammet does, that the poor of this life will enter Paradise five hundred years before the rich. When he had a vision of the seventh heaven as it was to be, he saw that many more of the poor were there than of the rich.

CHAPTER VII

ABOUT ISLAM AND ITS PROPHET

THERE are two things which the average man knows about the Prophet of Islam: that his coffin is suspended between heaven and earth, and the saying that "if the mountain won't come to Mohammet, Mohammet must go to the mountain." As the Prophet never had a coffin, and no Moslem I ever knew had heard of the mountain, this knowledge seems to amount to less than nothing, or perhaps equals that of Mrs. Skewton, who declared that the wicked Turks said, "There is no What's-his-name but Thingummy, and What-you-may-call-it is his prophet!"—which Dickens himself thought, quite erroneously, was a revision of a quotation from the Koran.

And yet the life of Mohammet has influenced more human souls than any other, save one. There are 170,000,000 of Asiatic and 60,000,000 of African Moslems, in addition to the Moslems of Europe. In South-Eastern Europe, excluding Russia, there are 3,500,000 souls of this faith. The Mohammedan subjects of Great Britain are more in number than those of any other Power.

Islam means the Baptism of God, and is the name given by the Prophet himself to the religion he founded. While the whole world outside Islam speaks of Mohammedanism, that name is never used by the people themselves. They rebut the name as

the apostle did who reproved those who said, "I am of Paul, I am of Cephas, I am of Apollos." So entirely is this religion the outcome of the mind of the one man, however, that it is not surprising that what was at first a nickname (for to label Islam with the first name of its Prophet is almost as though one should call the Wesleyans "Johnites") has grown into one title by which alone the religion is designated.

Mohammet ben Abdallah (*ben* meaning "son of"), to give him his full name, was born A.D. 569 or 570, at Mecca, in Arabia, in poor circumstances, but with connections of some influence, who in later life were able to give him protection which possibly saved him from assassination, and certainly from outlawry, more than once.

Arabia in those days was a turbulent, barbarous country, whose fierce and warlike tribes had resisted the approach of other Powers which had subdued surrounding countries. The civilising influences of Europe failed to make any impression on Arabia: Rome tried to administer it and failed; Byzantium was content to keep it at arm's length.

This peninsula, cut off by the sea on three sides, and on the fourth by a desert, although it was almost as great in area as India, eventually lost its attraction for the Western world, and so long as its fierce tribes did not trouble the great trade marches at the North, it was left alone.

Tenacious of old customs and traditions, ferocious in guarding their tribal rights, these people had changed but little since early Bible days, when Hagar went out into the desert with Ishmael.

In religion the Arabians had lapsed into idolatry; their chief temple was at Mecca, where a great many

strange ceremonies (some of them retained to this day, with a fresh meaning) were performed in worship of its idols, said to number as many as the days of the lunar year.

One of the most cherished of all traditions of the Arabians was, and is to this day, that the Kaaba, or temple at Mecca, was erected by Abraham and his son Ishmael; and while this is scoffed at by many writers, there are others who, like Burton, from a very intimate knowledge of these people, have found reason for the belief that where a tradition is held as universally and with such depth as this, the probability is that it is based on truth, or, at any rate, that it may be left an open question. More authentic history places the period 993 years before Solomon's temple, or 2,000 years before the Christian era.

On the authority of the Bible we know that some of the Arabs were descended from Abraham through Kedar, Ishmael's second son, but the idolatry into which Mohammet was born was far removed from the religion of the book of Genesis, where is written the life of the patriarch who is declared in the Koran to have raised the foundations of the Kaaba.*

It is always said by his followers that Mohammet was illiterate, and, as reading and writing were not very generally practised in his day, it is not surprising that he refers to himself as "unlettered."† The ignorance—or half-knowledge—betrayed by every reference in the Koran to the Jewish Scriptures and other ancient histories seems to show that what knowledge he had was gained by hearsay, and not by reading.

With his natural cleverness and quick ear he would possibly gain a perfect knowledge of Arabic,

* Sura ii, 121. † Sura vii, 156.

as spoken at Mecca, by learning by heart and reciting the songs and tribal lays in which these people have always delighted.

We knew more than one lad in Biskra who, although he did not write, had an apparently endless store of Arab desert songs, and even the Kabyle chants of the mountains, picked up by ear.

Mohammet was doubtless, as a lad, clever and reliable, with a mind turning towards the contemplation of religious things. By the time he was twenty-five his exceptional qualities were so well known that a wealthy widow woman of the town entrusted to him the conduct of an important caravan to Bostra.

His management of this business was so satisfactory in every way, and so profitable, that the widow offered to marry him, and by doing so raised the almost penniless youth into the peaceful enjoyment of a fortune. The reward may seem disproportionate until one remembers the risks and the dangers of such undertakings in a wild, ungoverned country, amongst men more full of cunning and subtle knavery than those in any other part of the world. To manage his own men of the caravan, to escape the daring and to outwit the wiles of possible enemies, eventually to dispose of the goods entrusted to him to the greatest advantage—all this must have commended him to his employer as a man of mark.

His union with Khadijah seems to have been a perfect one. On the side of the woman there was the most sublime devotion, leading to a faith which was not shaken even when, later on, he claimed to have visions from Heaven and to be chosen as the one Prophet of God. Through all the losses and tribulations which the new rôle entailed, she remained firm. On the side of Mohammet there was deep respect and

affection, which kept him true to this one wife until her death, ten years after the beginning of his mission (620 A.D.).

In these early traits we find an indication of the qualities which account for the history of this man, whose work was to leave such marvellous effect upon time and upon eternity. He was a man of great understanding of his fellow-men, of great courage, and of perfect judgment in awaiting his opportunity, and in the use to be made of opportunity when it came to him. There was a remarkable simplicity in his character, and a true appreciation of the relative importance of mundane things, which is so often found in the really great.

It is said that for years before Mohammet became subject to visions he was in the habit of going away to a retired spot in the hills to fast and give his entire mind to reflection on spiritual things. When at last great truths were borne in upon him, he gave himself fervently to their deliverance. Fortune, comfort, life itself, became nothing to him in comparison with his mission as a Prophet of God. Before success was anywhere in sight he put everything he had to the hazard, and when power was within his grasp he still taught simplicity for both himself and his followers, commending to them those things which belong to the eternal verities, and warning against the shams and the delusions of life which lead men astray from the higher path.

He was forty years of age when he received his first experience of Revelation; the first word sent to him was to "Recite in the Name of the Lord, Who created man."* It is from this word—recite—that the name of the Koran is taken. A strange physical

* Sûra xcvi.

experience came upon him. At the first convulsion he cried to his wife, "Cover me! Cover me!" and she spread his mantle over him. Again, in sonorous language, a kind of rhymed prose, which always had stirred the Arab mind, a message came to him, brought from God by the angel Gabriel, to "Arise and preach! Magnify thy Lord!"*

Mohammet now conceived himself to be the Prophet whose message was to call men from idolatry to the worship of the One True God. From this moment he lived but to fulfil this mission and to deliver to mankind the Book of God's word.

In most works written by Christian critics about Mohammet it is asserted that he was an epileptic, and that his visions were experienced during the paroxysms of his disease. By all his followers this is indignantly denied, and they declare that it was a base invention of the Greeks. Even his most relentless enemies, however, those who accuse him of imposture and deceit in every stage of the rôle which they declare he deliberately undertook from the basest of motives, can find no evidence that he ever showed the physical signs of epilepsy—such as biting the tongue, dropping what was in the hand, or, most important of all, the gradual degeneration of the mind.

The briefest outline of the marvellous twenty years which remained of his life after his first revelation will suffice to enable us to arrive at some sort of understanding of the religion which Mohammet started.

As Carlyle said: "Here stands this man in a majority of one!" The whole debased, disjointed, chaotic world of Arabia is before him, which his soul

* Sura lxxiv, 2, 3.

longs to win from a revolting worship of idols to a nobler and better worship. For four years his message gains scarcely any hold. His wife, after a little explanation, believes in his mission.

We should expect to find that a man of his character had good friends—it is said his uprightness earned for him the name of "the Trusty"—and Mohammet was, above all things else, fortunate in the quality of the men who possessed his confidence. Abu Bakr, whom he had known for two years, was an early convert, and became the chief of his apostles. He was a man capable of blind devotion to a friend. In the darkest days he never questioned or looked back. Next to his conversion, in importance to the movement, was that of a man of quite a different type: Omar was a man of herculean strength, of compelling force of character.

Where Bakr was courteous and gentle, Omar was commanding and determined; where the one was compassionate and kind the other was for swift and cruel justice, or even for vengeance, on opponents and enemies. "If Satan were to meet Omar," said Mohammet, "he would get out of Omar's way."

Guided by the unerring instinct of the Prophet in getting the best service from his followers, these two men, by one means or another, broke through the barriers which confined the new sect, at first a secret society confined to one obscure family, and commanded the attention of the town.

An interesting fact about these two apostles shows the remarkable faculty of the Prophet in the management of men, and throws a sidelight on one of the most potent of the reforms which he instituted, to the great benefit of his own nation.

It was possibly on his return from his travels that

Mohammet saw how the tribal system and the blood feud were a cause of weakness to his country. If the member of a clan, or any person over whom the clan had thrown its protection, were slain, the whole clan demanded vengeance. This led to wasteful wars and to everlasting unrest. At this time honour had fallen so low, or men were so beginning to taste the advantages of property as to prefer them to the mere glory of conquest, that a poet of the day taunts his contemporaries with preferring goods and money to vengeance; with accepting blood-money where men of courage would have been satisfied only with blood.

The great idea came to Mohammet of a national patriotism which should end these wars between sections of his own countrymen, and should make war a national weapon to strengthen a people instead of exhausting its resources. Not even Mohammet could have foreseen how in this way trade would begin to flourish, and that within a century the treasures of practically the whole earth—from Delhi to Granada—would be at the disposal of this people, who before had been merely a number of separate tribes and clans, to whom the meaning of patriotism was a dead letter.

As one means to the end of superseding the claims of blood which led to the feuds of families and tribes, the Prophet instituted "brotherhood," a new and binding relationship between pairs of believers. It was a brilliant inspiration to couple Omar with his greatest friend and follower, Abu Bakr. The agreement of these two, so widely different in temperament, was complete, and the Prophet always looked to them for advice. His hold over the fierce and bloodthirsty Omar was no less strong than over the gentle Bakr. Omar asked only to be trusted and respected by Mohammet. The Prophet once decided

not to wear rich clothing, and, taking off his silken robe, offered it to Omar, who, at the fancied slight, burst into tears.

There was, of course, much opposition and even violence towards the new teaching of Islam; and if the Prophet's uncle, Abu Talib, had not been the head of an important clan, and, although professing no belief in his nephew's strange teaching, had not been willing, from a sense of family duty, to throw over him his protection (by which injury to Mohammet would have been revenged as done to the whole tribe), the whole movement might have been immediately stamped out by the indignant Meccans. In using the blood-feud for his own protection while it lasted, the Prophet again showed that practical sense which never deserted him.

For ten years the history of Mohammet's mission is largely a history of discussions and debate with Mecca. The converts argued, and sometimes preached; and the Prophet delivered mighty orations burning with zeal and powerful with fiery eloquence. All the time new revelations were being added to the gathering Koran, the merits of which were recognised even by the poets, the chief of whom admitted himself eclipsed by one of the Suras which was nailed up in the public place where such works were submitted to the criticism of the populace.

The people of Mecca were naturally opposed to the new doctrines, which ran counter to their familiar beliefs in the Gods of the Kaaba, after whom many of them were named in gratitude for intervention, and which also threatened, if they prevailed, to ruin the trade of the town, subsisting largely on the needs of visitors to the religious capital.

If the fear of a blood-feud alone prevented the

extermination of Islam with the sword, the opposition found other means of persecution. The followers of the new sect were first kept out of the precincts of the Kaaba, and then were harassed by an organised boycott, which reduced them almost to starvation. As long as means lasted, those who were rich, like the Prophet, shared their abundance with the poor brethren, until all alike were hungering. When their sufferings became well-nigh unendurable a certain number of them fled to Abyssinia. The Meccan authorities demanded their extradition, sending envoys to escort them back. But the King was not easily moved, saying that before he acted he would like to know something of this new religion. Mohammet specially wrote a Sura for this occasion, and when the first part of it (Sura xix) was read to him the Negus was moved to tears, and he resolved, in spite of all representations, never to abandon these people. And he remained a faithful friend of Mohammet's until his death.

In Mecca these developments caused the greatest consternation, for an invasion was feared from these new friends of the Prophet. Among the further measures of suppression everything was done to render Mohammet an outlaw. Certain of the converts retired to a ravine, where they existed under a ban for two or three years.

Under the patronage of the Negus, Mohammet had become dangerous as a political power, for about this time the Abyssinians had gained success in a frontier war, which the Meccans were persuaded would be followed by an attack on themselves. To avoid this another attempt was made to persuade the refugees to come home, and a compromise was suggested even to Mohammet himself. In this he gave

an assent—which can only be regarded as disgraceful—to the genuineness of certain of the goddesses of the Kaaba, against whom Islam had previously protested, as a condition that the ban were withdrawn.

What pressure was exerted which led Mohammet into one of the worst blunders of his career can never be known. For once he misread the men he had to deal with of his own party; he admitted an element of weakness into his religious claims, and brought upon himself such discredit as put a stop to the advance of his cause until events of such moment occurred as to obliterate the disgrace. The truth was that the sufferings of his followers had tried them; the fire of persecution had burned out the dross from those who were in earnest, as it had rid the camp of those who were false or weak or mere adventurers. The sufferings they had endured for their faith had made it dear to them. In a burst of enthusiasm these men declared that they would not desert their worship of the One True God. The goddesses, with all other idols, should still be anathema to them. Fierce must have been the discussion, and possibly for the first time (but not for the last) the Prophet had proof that the firmness of his own will was equalled by that of Omar's.

In the end he gave way; the verses of revelation were withdrawn.* He had, he said, been subjected to a temptation of the Devil. The event burnt itself into his mind; and years later, when it is possible that his followers no longer recalled it, he returned to his apology: "We have not sent any apostle or prophet before thee, but when he read Satan suggested some error in his reading. But God shall make void that which Satan hath suggested."† From

* Sura liii, 19, 20. † Sura xxii, 51.

this time his denunciation of idolatry becomes sterner and sterner.

The refugees for the most part returned to Abyssinia, and in Mecca the position was more embittered than ever, although the opponents of Islam felt that the event had brought such discredit in Abyssinia on the fugitives and their friends that the danger of invasion from that quarter had passed.

This brings us to the year 10 of the mission, a year which perhaps marked the depth of the suffering and privation of the new sect, to which sorrow at the loss of Khadijah, the Prophet's wife, was added. Abu Talib also died at this time, and although he refused to the last to say the words which would have made him a Moslem, he faithfully stood by the ties of blood to which his nephew owed so much.

It is often said of the Arabs that they are lacking in faithfulness and fidelity. I have myself seen so much evidence to the contrary that I believe my many Arab friends when they tell me that when they give their affection not even life itself can set a limit to its constancy. "God is not pleased with thanklessness in His servants,"* wrote the Prophet, and in his own life he was true to his precept that faithfulness is part of the teaching of Allah. To the end he referred with gratitude and love to his first wife, and to have been a friend or protégé of hers was to be sure of the kindness of the Prophet. No man in this world has ever owed more to human constancy and faithfulness than Mohammet himself.

It is probable that the death of Abu Talib exposed Mohammet to such unrestrained persecution that he left for Ta'if, only to be mobbed there by the idolatrous populace. Fortunately, at this time the sacred

* Sura xxxix, 9.

months began, the time of truce in the Arab year, when the tribes laid down their arms, and universal peace and immunity from attack, whether for revenge or robbery, was recognised—an institution which probably had alone preserved the strength and resources of these warlike and bloodthirsty people. In spring, in the month of sowing and the increase of animals; and in three autumn months, when the crops would be gathered and the caravans would set out to dispose of produce, this reign of security and peace was observed throughout Arabia in the days of barbarity.

Mohammet, for the time secure, returned to the outskirts of Mecca, where the great fair was being held, and preached his gospel of the One God. Under a shower of clods he stood up in the market-place—how modern it sounds, with the memory of the first days of Wesley and of Whitfield in mind, and, later still, of the Salvation Army! Inspired men, who were not to be silenced by stones, and water from the village fire-engine, by discordant brass bands, even by the clanging of the church bells!

At this time envoys from Yathrib (now called Medina, the "City of the Prophet") came to offer Mohammet the protection of their city. Before he decided on what is called "the Flight," legend says that he was offered many bribes from the wealthy chiefs of his native place. But here was a rare man who at this time had no price. Actuated, I believe, by a passionate desire to deliver his country from the worship of idols, to call them to a nobler worship of the One God (an enthusiasm for this worship possessing his own soul), and, if they were ever willing to listen, to raise them to a higher plane of moral worth, Mohammet was unbribable.

In addition to his religious mission, I believe Mohammet was ambitious to remove the obstacles to a national patriotism, of which he had become conscious, and so fit the Arabs to take their place as a powerful people by the side of the other nations, whose prosperity and greatness he had seen in his early travels. In his darkest hour, when ignominy and failure met him on all sides, he refused to accept any terms that would turn him aside from his great mission, sincerely believing, I think, that he had been accredited by Heaven.

Many conjectures have been made as to the reasons which prepared the ground for Mohammet's reception at Medina. It is a city about 250 miles to the north of Mecca, and ten days' journey, of a most desirable situation for the fertility of its soil and its supply of water. Unlike Mecca, it favours the cultivation of the palm. But its most important point, in the sequel, proved to be that it lay in the main route of the caravans going down to Mecca.

A considerable part of its inhabitants were Jews, who claimed descent from settlers there in the time of Moses. It is probable that a somewhat garbled version of Mohammet's teaching had previously reached the chief men of the place, and that while certain Arabs had been influenced in his favour by hearing him preach at Mecca, the Jews were not against him owing to their belief that he worshipped the Israelitish God, was the enemy of idolatry, and believed in the resurrection of the dead. A small number of enquirers had sought out Mohammet in Mecca to ask as to the teaching of his religion and its practices, and then returned to Medina, having given a promise to the Prophet to abstain from infanticide (the burying of girl infants alive), theft,

adultery and lying, and to refer to him for further guidance. This party grew to forty, and was always spoken of as the Helpers; these men, with the help of a missionary sent by Mohammet, spread their faith, and in their early enthusiasm broke many of their idols. In another year their number had increased to seventy, and it was these, at a meeting to consider the straits to which their Prophet was reduced, who were unanimous in a resolution to bring him to Medina.

Rumours of the Flight spread in Mecca, and a faint idea seems to have occurred to the city leaders of what it might mean for Mohammet and all his followers to set up a community in the rival town. They tried persuasion with the most important of their fellow-citizens who were known to be amongst the converts, but their action was feeble and ineffective. In small groups these persecuted people stole away, to be received with open arms at Medina, where, with apostolic fervour, the Helpers held their possessions in common with their newfound brethren.

Almost the last to join the Flight was the Prophet himself, who long stood out against the advice of Abu Bakr to trust all to the faithfulness of those who offered to shelter and protect him. It was only when the news of his projected assassination reached him that he consented to depart; and not before the hue and cry had been started by the committee of cowards, a member of each tribe, who had planned to murder him in concert, as a way of escaping the tribal consequences. He dodged the assassins, and laughed at their offer, as a reward for his capture, of a hundred camels, from his hiding-place in the security of the Cave, as it is

always called, in Mount Rawr, to the south of Mecca. In a beautiful passage he afterwards recorded how—

> "God assisted him formerly, when the unbelievers drove him forth out of Mecca, in company with a second only (Abu Bakr), when they were both in the cave; when he said unto his companion, 'Be not distressed; verily God is with us.' And God sent down His tranquillity upon him, and strengthened him with armies of angels, whom ye saw not."*

By an awful journey through three hundred miles of dreariest desert, with dark ravines at intervals, and in some parts stony wastes, Mohammet reached Medina, exhausted, and nervously apprehensive. Finding his converts faithful, he soon regained his strength, and began to examine his position with the eye of a councillor and ruler. So successful was he in this rôle that in a short time he was accorded a veneration excelling that of many monarchs.

But if he suffered the adulation of his court, he resisted every temptation to material display, constantly exhorting his followers against arrogance of manner and aggrandisement, whether in the matter of personal adornment or in the buildings they erected for either sacred or secular use. If he was a charlatan, his end was not private gain, for in all things he shared the lot of his followers; and when "stated alms" were added as a part of the religious observance of Islam, he refused to use them for his own needs, and forbade any member of his family to profit by them. He claimed to be a "plain warner," "no more than an apostle."

To the end of his life Mohammet was poor, dying in debt, a Jew holding his cuirass in pawn.

* Sura ix, 40.

Many are the frugal maxims of the Koran, and on every page his gospel is to the poor and meek, with counsel to the mighty ones of the earth as to their special faults and temptations which stand between them and eternal happiness.

And if Mohammet taught his people these many virtues, he also practised them; he showed meekness and clemency, he was courteous and kind and forgiving. He was not soft with himself, but dealt out blame when his conscience accused him of any falling from his standard, asking pardon for slights to his fellow-men, or even to an importunate beggar, and craving of God forgiveness for his sins. He brought to his sovereign rule the same probity in keeping his engagements as had distinguished him in his simpler days.

Only once in the Koran, in spite of much provocation from those who taunted him and those who contemned, did this man born of a fierce race betray ungoverned anger; when a man practically called him a liar and accused him of trying to foist on his countrymen mere "fables of the ancients," his self-control gave way, and with it his sense of humour, for he descended to vulgar abuse, even to the street boy's formula of "punching his enemy's beak," which Sale so deliciously translates, "We will stigmatise him on the nose."* There is, however, a verse of vulgar threats to the Jews rather suggestive of Whitechapel in Sura iv, 50.

After the Flight there is a great change in the general tone of the Koran. Till then a voice had been crying in the wilderness. With poetic fervour the Prophet had called men to repentance and the worship of the One God, the Compassionate, the

* Sura lxviii, 16.

Merciful. With impassioned eloquence he warned men of the woe and punishments awaiting those who persisted in wickedness, while promising to the "well-doers" seven heavens of delight, leading to Paradise and the Throne of God.

In the first fifty Suras of the Koran this man seems to be concerned only to call men to turn from the works of the Flesh and to cultivate the fruits of the Spirit. Literally he cried out, with flashes of prophetic insight, against idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulation, wrath, strife, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like, as cancelling the inheritance of the Kingdom of God, and pointed these violent and barbarous people to the peaceable fruits of righteousness—to avoid vain disputes, to feed the poor, to protect the orphan, to guide the erring, to put a true value upon wealth, to refrain from backbiting, to be single-hearted in prayer, to be warned by those "who make a show of devotion but refuse to help the needy,"* to yield assent to the good, to be truthful, "to ransom the captive, and to feed in the day of famine the orphan who is near of kin, or the poor that lieth in the dust,"† to be steadfast and truthful, to give measure without stint, to be true to trusts and engagements, and to witness uprightly, to refrain from arrogance, and above all things, to trust in Allah and submit to His will.

This was the message of the early days of Mohammet, and to my mind it is this inspiration which is the true marvel of his whole life.

Out of this idolatrous race, to whom we are assured no previous revelation of spiritual truth had been given, this one man is raised. "We have

* Sura cvii, 6, 7. † Sura xc, 13, 14, 15.

given them no books of scripture wherein to exercise themselves, nor have we sent unto them any warner before thee."* Even in their Pagan rites they could only say that they followed the customs of their fathers.

These are the conditions we must keep in mind if we would estimate the place of Mohammet as a true Prophet of the One God.

Alas! that when the time came, as it always has come to those who are sent to kindle and hold up a light of guidance for mankind, "to be tempted of the devil" with the whisper, "All these things will I give thee if thou wilt fall down and worship me," the Evil One gained another victory over the powers of light.

With security and growing power at Medina, Mohammet's kingdom became largely of this world, and there was consequent degeneration in his message, as in his whole life. Much of the poetry of the Koran vanishes, though its form is retained. Fervour for single-minded goodness and the worship of God, and a deep appreciation of the beauty of the natural world, which were rare if not unique as he first conceived them—these are weakened.

The admonisher, the humble teacher, the reasonable persuader, the man of peace, who would fight only for defence, becomes the legislator and the dictator. The aggressive sword succeeds the persuasive pen, prose takes the place of poetry, an ignorant plagiarism of Arabian legend and Christian and Jewish story is given—in his own incomparable manner, however—instead of those first deliverances of such potential freshness and force as eventually

* Sura xxxiv, 43.

to create the starting-point of a new epoch in the world of philosophy and literature.*

It was in the early days of the settlement at Medina that Mohammet perfected the details of his religious system. The first mosque was built, a simple place with a very imperfect roof, supported by palm trunks, and with a mud floor. The proper hours of prayer were fixed for all time, and the call to prayer—how Bilal's fine voice must have thrilled the town in these early days!—was instituted. Soothsayers, who held a great sway over the people, were forbidden, and in a short time this man who had crept into the town as a fugitive was by common consent made sole authority over tribal and individual rights.

Khadijah being dead, Mohammet for the first time started a regular harem, which he increased until he possessed as many as nine wives. Most writers have seen in this nothing but evidence of gross passion; but curiously enough the most severe of modern critics of his life offers, concerning what Carlyle in his lame apology calls "the sorest chapter of all for us," an explanation less damaging to the Prophet's character than had been previously held. "Several of his alliances were political in character, the Prophet being anxious to bind his chief followers more and more closely to himself. This was doubtless his object in marrying the daughters of Abu Bakr and Omar; while a political motive of a different sort is to be found in his alliances with the daughters of political opponents and fallen enemies.

* Some critics condemn the repetitions of the Koran, but those who know anything at first hand of the Eastern mind understand how it is impressed by repetition. Even in the letters I get to-day from Arab friends I find that to accentuate the meaning of a sentence they repeat it.

The remainder are explained by his extreme anxiety to have a son, and thereby escape a reproach to which he was keenly sensitive."* To be sonless is, to an Arab, to be without honour in the land, unworthy of respect, and to be unfollowed to the grave.

The first trouble he had in Medina was from the Jews, whom he had at first hoped to conciliate by meeting their views in such matters as the mode of killing meat and abstinence from pork. The early prayers of Islam had been said with faces turned towards Jerusalem. But the Jews never did anything but prevaricate and temporise, often doing lip-service while they were working subtly to undermine the Prophet's position. No confidence could ever be established between the two peoples. Mohammet was irritated to the quick when, with their superior knowledge of the Bible, the Jews brought to light his ignorance of it. And when at last he found Jewish plots to murder him, all thought of compromise was driven out by bitter hatred. It was an easy step now which led to Mohammet's wicked resolution to rid himself by extermination of foes who, while they lacked the courage effectively to oppose, were yet willing to sneer and aggravate.

There is no occasion to elaborate the history of Islam and its Prophet from this point. One thing is of especial interest, the growth of events which led to the use of the sword. Up to this time there is not a single word in the Koran which suggests that it was ever in the Prophet's mind to establish an empire by violent and aggressive conquest to enforce his tenets. If he had succeeded at Mecca,

* "Mohammed," by D. S. Margoliouth.

possibly such an idea never would have occurred to him.

> "Invite men to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and with kindly warning; dispute with them in the kindest manner; thy Lord knoweth best those who have strayed from His way." *

Hunger is a stern master. After a few months at Medina the strain on the Helpers in keeping so many men detached from their ordinary work was intolerable. The pinch of hunger and the disgrace of nakedness began to press upon the refugees, who, in spite of their willingness to work at menial tasks were yet unable to earn a bare subsistence. What a light it throws on the depths of privation to which all this band of enthusiasts have sunk, to read that Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law, was paid for carrying water at the rate of a date a journey, and that when he had earned sixteen dates he shared them with Mohammet, who was pinched with hunger.

Two conspicuous instances of ignorance of common things stand out in the Prophet's clever life, and one of these almost completed the starvation of his people at this time. He forbade the artificial fertilisation of the date, for some reason unknown (possibly from the lack of knowledge of a Meccan in things agricultural), and so brought ruin on the year's crop. His other error, at a later time, forbade the adjustment of the Arab lunar Calendar each year, so that the twelve lunar months lost all relation to the seasons, to the perplexity of all Mohammedans to this day.

In all the extremities described, the Jews drove home every advantage of the pawnbroker and usurer,

* Sura xvi, 126.

flaunting their own opulence. If anything could exceed the hatred of the Moslems for the people of Mecca, it was the hate they felt for the Jews.

And past the doors of men desperate with privations rich caravans were regularly passing with treasures from the north for the citizens of Mecca, or gold and produce from the city to pay for further supplies. What a temptation to Arab flesh and blood to take vengeance, and at the same time to supply those bodily needs which would not be gainsaid. They had agreed in their first days at Medina by solemn covenant to preclude the Meccans from all friendly relations; it was a short step to give them a taste of active resentment for the sufferings they were responsible for. To convince the most pious, who lived by the Koran, the sacred book was debased by a new revelation:

> "A sanction is given to those who, because they have been unjustly persecuted, have taken up arms. And verily God is well able to succour them: Those who have been driven forth from their homes wrongfully, only because they say, 'Our Lord is the God.' . . . If God did not repel the violence of some men by others, verily monasteries, and churches, and synagogues, and the mosques of the Moslems, wherein the Name of God is ever commemorated, would surely be demolished." *

A plausible and cunningly devised message, the threefold object of which is obvious. The virus worked in the Arab blood; the knee was bent to Baal; they determined to live by the sword, and by the sword that day perished their highest ideal.

Poor success attended the first raids upon the

* Sura xxii, 40, 41.

Meccan caravans. To cover a further fall in the moral standard, the Prophet worked himself up into a fresh fury against the Meccans, the while he contemplated the dishonour of sending an armed force against a caravan which he heard had set out in the immemorial faith, and without arms, in the sacred month!

If Mohammet had no conscience to trouble him over this misdeed—evidence seems to suggest that he was thoroughly ashamed—the Jews used all their venomous qualities to sting him. To ease the smart he changed the prayer direction, with the Arab insult of turning the back to Jerusalem, which brought the faces of the devout towards the Meccan temple. Ramadhân he substituted for the fast of the Day of Atonement; Friday he made the sacred day, for no reason but that it was not Saturday. In no one thing were the Arabs to copy the Jews. Mohammet even shaved his head so as to effect as great a change as possible from his previous Jewish style of wearing his hair.

Of these slights, the turning of the back on Jerusalem was the most keenly felt, and the Jews cringed, when they realised how this hatred would affect them, where before they had jibed. Their cringing only strengthened the deep resolve to destroy them when the day came.

The Sura called "The Cow," a marvellous production of a pagan mind, although so lacking in the exalted qualities of the earlier messages, accentuated the hatred for the people of Mecca. Ominous were the words "Civil strife is worse than bloodshed"; but with black thoughts in his mind, which soon were to make carnage and assassination possible, this marvellous man was able to construct in

this Sura what was practically a code of laws by which his followers have ever since been ruled. At times he breaks away from the prosaic utterances in flights of the most exalted praise of "the living, the eternal God." In a few words, too, he established what, to people of the East especially, is the inestimable blessing of abstinence from intoxicants, and he abolished gambling and usury.

The people of Mecca sent out troops to avenge the gathering misdeeds of the fugitives, in such numbers that it is clear they contemplated making an end of them.

Mohammet had secret warning; organised his forces, spoke eloquently to them of their grievances, and alluringly of coming spoils—to the Arabs a magic word—and marched out to meet the foe. At the age of fifty-three he proved himself a great commander by gaining the victory of Badr, the battle which was of such immense importance to him.

The men of Medina, over whom he had reigned so short a time, marched to the field a disciplined and well-ordered army. The very exercises of daily prayer in which they had followed him had drilled them in precision (to fall out of line in concerted prayer is to incur divine punishment), while they profited by the mere bodily movements of devotion.

The autocrat with genius is the perfect commander. Under such a leader, when men are fighting not only for life, but for their faith, and they hear the impassioned prayers of their commander to their God, who has first revealed specially to them a promise of help, victory over troops lacking all these things is certain.

The Meccans were a disjointed horde, without leadership, discipline, or any sort of quickening faith.

While the men of Islam slept during the night with "sleep, a sign of security from Him, fallen upon them," their enemy agitated themselves with quarrels and fears. While these approached the battle with the dread of death before them, the men of Islam, so sincere was their faith, regarded death on such a day as more to be desired than victory.

This was called the Day of Deliverance. In the march towards the Kingdom of this World it was rightly named. But it was in truth a day of bondage, for the first generous payment made by the tempter on that day sealed the enslavement. It now appeared that God was on the side of the sword; spoils were His reward; the march through blood over the whole earth was in reality now begun. Well might the Song of Victory* be called "The Spoils." It is a dreary psalm that has booty for its theme and sings the praise of "God *and* His Apostle."

Wealth and power were now in the hands of the refugees and their friends, and almost the first use they made of their strength was to harass the Jews until they preferred to leave the city with their bare lives, while their goodly possessions were regarded by the Prophet as further spoils of war. The Moslems appropriated the houses and property of seven hundred of the wealthiest men of the town, who were driven away, possibly to perish. At this time critics of Mohammet were "removed," a word from the sovereign being sufficient for the sycophant who always is found listening for such suggestions from rulers capable of making them. And further caravan raiding added to the growing wealth of the community.

There was one set-back: the defeat of Uhud; but

* Sura viii.

although it looked serious at the time, it was of little moment in the history of Islam at Medina. It drew forth the Sura "Imran," another wearisome harangue, alternately threatening and flattering the Prophet's followers, rebutting all criticism of his own part in the failure, and boasting of previous success. The God who sent angels to their aid at Badr had equally good intentions in alternating "days of successes and reverses." From which it will be seen, what every observer of modern prophets must be convinced of, that it is impossible at any point to quench the egotism of such men.

It was while he was waiting to redeem this failure that he attacked the Jews of Nadir, three miles from Medina, drove them out from their fortified position, and took possession of their property and lands. To cover this act, another dreary Sura was written, in which the Jews are accused of cowardice.

> "They will not fight against you in a body except in fenced towns or from behind walls. Mighty is their valour among themselves! Thou thinkest them united, but their hearts are divided." *

Naturally these raids roused the Jews of other tribes, and an attempt at combination was made; a treaty was settled with the Meccans within the curtains of the Kaaba, in which the parties bound themselves to oppose Mohammet. He was specially enraged to hear that Jew and idolater had joined forces, and, fearing the result, he took the advice of Salman the Persian, who had been a slave at Medina, and dug the famous trench about which so much is written in the Traditions of Islam. Some

* Sura lix, 14.

of his men disliked such an expedient for defence, thinking it unworthy of fighting men. But the Prophet, who was in all things practical, and never bound by preconceived notions, himself took a pick-axe and made a start with the trench. Three thousand men worked continuously at it in three relays. So that when the combined armies came upon the city they found their advance effectively checked. Secure behind the trench, the men of Islam would not give fight to the mighty force outside except to check the feeble and unsupported attempts that were made to cross it.

Mohammet owed much at different times in his life to the faithfulness, the courage, the cleverness of men who were or had been slaves. In this matter of the trench he owed to another slave the means of resistance to an army strong enough to annihilate all the force of Islam; for it was this device which ruined what proved to be the last and most promising chance of his enemies to destroy him. No wonder that he made it a chief merit in a Moslem to set free his slaves, and ordered that they should be treated with every kindness and consideration as brothers in the faith.

When the Meccans returned home, defeated at every point, Mohammet did not rest until he had destroyed the Jews of Kuraizah, who had joined them. Sa'd ben Mu'ahd was sent to punish them. The men were decapitated, their goods seized, and the women and children enslaved.

All the forces that seek the shelter of victorious battalions now rallied to the increase of Islam, and for a year expeditions were constantly sent out which demonstrated in all directions that it was a wise thing to make terms with this ever-growing power.

The qualities of Mohammet as a ruler were severely tested by internal strife between the Helpers and the Refugees. The division of booty, or, in civilised times, of legacy, is always the most fruitful source of family division; but the Prophet's skill was fully equal to all the varied demands that test a ruler. One day the disputants would have fallen upon each other with the sword; Omar was, of course, willing, but Mohammet commanded peace and broke up the camp in the heat of midday, divining that the soldiers in their fatigue would forget the dispute, with the result that Omar acknowledged the superior mind of the leader.

We have now reached the year 628. The dream of Mohammet's life is to gain his native town. In the Sura of this time he sees a vision of the day when—

> "Ye shall surely enter the sacred Mosque, if God will, in full security, having your heads shaved and your hair cut.* Ye shall not fear; for He knoweth what ye know not; and He hath ordained you beside this a speedy victory." †

The Meccans, hearing of his designs, sent him word that they were determined to keep him outside their city. They scorned his pacific hints, and defied his threats. A treaty was, however, made which did not reflect much credit on Mohammet, and nearly lost him the allegiance of Omar. The Prophet did all he could to impress Mecca with his wealth and power, and with the reverence he still had for the sacred Kaaba, to which Islam turned in prayer five times a day; declaring that the dearest wish of its

* The Moslem cuts off the hair from every part of his body.

† Sura xlviii, 27.

followers was to visit as pilgrims the House of God in the month of Peace.

Some of the short-sighted Meccans were shocked at the impiety of keeping men away who desired to do honour to God and His Temple. Others were beginning to think that it was a pity that Mecca should not have a share in the growing glory and wealth of the new religion; there was even an inclination to boast that Mohammet was a citizen of theirs; it was to argue themselves unknown, to treat as an alien a man whom all the world seemed to be joining to venerate.

By the treaty the Moslems were to be allowed to visit Mecca next year on pilgrimage. The Kuriash was to vacate it for three days, during which Mohammet might use the Kaaba.

Another raid on a rich Jewish community marked this time. Khaibar is a hundred miles distant from Medina; to attack it was the most ambitious of the raids, therefore, and in speaking of the project there was no mention of any object but spoils until Ali pressed for a reason, when Mohammet spoke the words which were so fraught with meaning to the future: that the Moslems must now fight to extend their religion!

It was a rich community, settled on the edge of a fertile oasis which the Jews had cultivated with industry and skill. The Moslems met with more prolonged opposition (one may wonder why Mecca did not strike at Medina when the troops were so far away) than they expected, but eventually overpowered the community.

The waste of decapitation having occurred to the Prophet, he devised what afterwards became an important institution, giving much impetus to the

idea of the conquest of the world by a people who, like the Arabs, while willing to fight were always anxious to escape work. The lives of these Jews were saved, and their landed property was not interfered with; they were to go on with their work, and contribute annually half their produce. They became a subject caste, and Mohammet was able to take back his army intact for further warfare, leaving only such officials as were necessary to collect the impost, and see that the guarantees to the protected community for their lives were respected. The spoils, consisting of the personal possessions of these people, were of tremendous value.

So scared were other Jewish communities with the news of this conquest that they sent to offer the tribute of half their crops. It was a specious plea that these things were done to extend the religion of Islam, for in taking a community under its protection a money payment, and not a religious test, was sought, while at the same time the excuse was thought good enough to warrant an attack by Islam in any quarter.

The "real estate" and "personalty" of Islam being now of great value, it is little wonder that Mohammet began to have thoughts of world-conquest, which he initiated by letters to such foreign rulers as he knew of, calling upon the whole world to adopt his teaching. By some the letters were ignored, while others—notably the King of Persia—were enraged by the impertinence. One of the rulers of Egypt sent presents, however, and the smaller chiefs of Arabia temporised, knowing doubtless that any man strong enough to enforce his wishes would compel the homage of smaller rulers in that country.

In the seventh year (dating as Islam does from

the Flight), according to the terms of the treaty, Mohammet enters Mecca again in regal state, part of the procession being taken at a gallop, to show the Meccans that the Refugees were no longer underfed and worn as at Badr (the gallop is still practised by pilgrims), and one of the instructions being to enter the city with a cheerful countenance. The pilgrimage was peacefully accomplished, and the Prophet, well pleased with the impression he had created, returned—for the present—to Medina.

The year 8 was marked by the folly of Islam in throwing itself against the Roman Empire. The spirit inspired in his soldiers by the Prophet is shown by the fact that many of the men at the battle of Mutah —a forlorn hope—at the moment of meeting the mighty host deliberately lamed their horses to prevent them from running away!

It was a broken remnant only that returned to Medina to tell the tale, and these slunk away ashamed from a populace which treated them as deserters, until Mohammet loyally spoke in their praise.

To cover defeat, Mohammet, as usual, planned a new expedition, with a better hope of victory. The time had come to strike at Mecca! On January 1, 630 A.D. (the 10th day of Ramadhân in the year 8), it is declared that no less than 10,000 troops mustered in Medina for the great expedition, before which all opposition melted. Islam entered the city of Mecca almost unchallenged. The idols of the Kaaba were abolished and the statues surrounding it were destroyed. The call to prayer, chanted by Bilal, the first muezzin, rang out from the top of the Kaaba!

This crowning success in no way disturbed the

Prophet's instinct as a politician and a ruler. The sanctity of the Kaaba was preserved; even its great treasure of gold was untouched; the ceremonies were to remain, with scarcely any alteration, except in meaning. Mecca was for ever to be a sanctuary from bloodshed. Clemency covered every right of the citizens as Mohammet found them on the day of entry; not a single reprisal was to be made; even the houses the refugees had originally left—including that of Khadijah—must not be reclaimed. The hereditary holders of the keys of the Kaaba were to retain their office.

Although the Prophet regarded Mecca as the best spot on earth, his stay only lasted a fortnight, as he wished to show his loyalty to his friends at Medina by returning there to live and die—evidence again, surely, of Mohammet's greatness of mind.

A new epoch was started. From this moment the roots of the national idea which Mohammet had for years had in his mind took firm hold. He established a true brotherhood of man; not in a theory which can chant on Sunday of "dearly beloved brethren," and on Monday return to feudal ideas or the practice of the snob. Every Moslem was made equal, with an equality which is as genuine to-day as it was when it was established.* The people of Islam were to recognise that they were members of one body, and that to injure one was to injure all.

He checked the thirst for revenge, and used all

* I do not forget the reproof I got at Biskra when I spoke to Taïb slightingly of a negro boy I disliked, wondering why the Arabs did not refuse to associate with him. "Sir," said Taïb, "he is a Moslem!" in a tone which implied that that settled the question.

his power to stop the oppression of widows and orphans. In inheritance sons were to share equally, so that there should be no excuse for family divisions; just as, by the abolition of tribal rights, justice should be done to all, without shield or favour.

It was a great conception for such a man to have, that with equality of rights all privilege in the matter of wrongdoing—which the tribal customs fostered—should be abolished too. For the first time in Arabia—and afterwards in many other primitive lands—it was Mohammet who made it possible to check crime and to punish it.

Mecca was fixed as the religious capital of Islam, and a visit to it was now prescribed by Mohammet as one of the stated religious duties of every Moslem, as a preparation for Paradise. Is it possible that the Prophet foresaw how this one condition would—by creating a great rallying-point—hold together his followers with an unswerving anchorage as nothing else could have done? That the gathering here every year of men of almost all races and languages, piously actuated by one motive, would weld together with a permanent bond millions who might be of one faith but would still have been alien to each other but for this institution?

The days of this wonderful man were closing in. In the second year after taking Mecca he led the pilgrimage himself (Abu Bakr had led it in the previous year), and worked incessantly, with secretaries and without rest—like any modern Prime Minister—in making the laws and regulations for Islam, which are as rigidly kept to-day as in the year they were devised. Nothing escaped him, and we are told that so clearly did his people recognise

that all their future depended on his instruction that he was incessantly questioned on all subjects, both secular and spiritual; and one can imagine the tenacious subtlety and inquisitiveness of his Arab interrogators! Nothing was too trivial for them; even to the right way of slicing a melon they observed and respected his dictates. In the enormous mass of recorded matter in the traditions, written by those who had heard him speak in ordinary conversation or were themselves his questioners, there is evidence of his wisdom and unfailing common sense, his shrewdness, his fairness, his humour, his kindness. He is said to have been almost always smiling—how this recalls the cheerful countenance of every good Arab we ever met!

He completed the Koran by laying down exact laws of inheritance which are more than equitable—they are fair and sensible, and especially as they affect women, a long way in advance of the ideas of pre-Islam times, when male heirs alone received inheritance from parents, women and young boys being excluded. Very humane were his orders as to the treatment of slaves; the care of the poor and the unfortunate was ensured by a hundred precepts.

All this burden had been too much for him. On his return to Medina his natural buoyancy of spirit had deserted him; a morbidness like that of the Wise King took possession of him, when he thought the day of a man's death better than the day of his birth, and the house of mourning better than the house of rejoicing. Several times he visited the cemetery at dead of night, and prayed earnestly for departed souls, congratulating them on their felicity as compared with the woes of the living.

The witty Ayesha, who ruled the harem and its

master, tried to rouse him; and when he asked her if she would not rather die before him, so that the Prophet of God might perform her obsequies, she piquantly alluded—with assumed gaiety, no doubt—to the fresh bride he would put in her place when he got home!

On a Thursday he collapsed, and on Monday he died, in Ayesha's chamber, the date being June 7, 632.

This same chamber was turned into a mortuary chapel; here to this day, built over it, is his venerated tomb, with those of his two chief friends, Bakr and Omar, and Ayesha herself—who lived thirty years longer, to exert a great influence over the early growth of Islam. In this chamber, too, is that empty tomb which the believer thinks will be occupied by the body of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will die, they say, and be buried in Medina.

Marvellous was the inspiration this one man, with a message aflame with faith in God and in a spiritual sphere, left behind him. The simple shepherds and spade labourers, Bedouins or wanderers in an arid peninsula, of no effect in the world's politics since the days of Abraham, except for a savage defiance and a cunning elusion of any race that attempted to trespass on their territory, and without any national aim or cohesion, seem all at once to rise as one man, a giant refreshed, with one mighty purpose, ready to subjugate the world in the name of their new-found God.

It was not in the power of brute force alone.

A significant fact, it always seems to me, is that after his very first victory the Prophet sent a number of boys of Medina to take lessons in writing from the clever men of Badr (as part payment of

ransom), pointing out to his people the great advantages of learning.

One of the chief allurements of conquest to an acquisitive people like the Arabs, was always, doubtless, the thought of the spoils of material wealth; but from Greece, Persia, Spain, India, they, with an extraordinary receptivity and teachableness, brought away the best that philosophy, letters, arts and crafts had to teach.

At a time when Christian Europe was in a state of rude barbarism, with literature almost extinct, the Arabs created, especially at Bagdad, at Cordova, Cairo, Delhi and Fostât, brilliant centres of advanced civilisation.

Europe is indebted, for the link which connects ancient and modern literature, to those Arabs who became known as the Saracens of Asia and the Moors of Spain. These collected libraries but for which classical literature must have been lost. Research has shown that much that was known, for some time before the Renaissance, of Greek philosophy, of medicine, of mathematics, natural history, geography, rhetoric and poetry, speaking generally, came by the medium of Latin works derived from the originals of the Arabian schools.

And surely it is to the Koran that we must look as the source of this new movement to which the world owes so much.

Still, it is left to us to deplore the overthrow of Christian churches, with all they stood for, in the East, by victorious Islam; disagreeing with Carlyle, who asserts that the Moslem always displaces "what is worse, nothing that is better or good."

But we can still admire the genius of the man whose immediate followers, keeping strictly to the

institutions he devised, could rule with so much good sense, and such administrative ability and justice, and even humanitarianism, the countries which their prowess conquered.

To some who have studied Mohammet's life it seems that if the early Christians had been true to their first faith, and had not distracted the pagan mind with quarrels and divisions, or elaborated, out of the simple story of the Cross, such involved doctrines as are still a stumbling block to the unsophisticated people of the southern world, this man, who was so nearly a Christian, might have become a true follower of Christ. What a different world it would have been. Softened and encouraged by the Atonement, and taught by divine compassion to practise the nobler code of forgiveness of the Sermon on the Mount, the light of this people, which after six hundred years burnt low, would have continued to shine in pristine brilliance over the whole earth, to the end of time.


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CHAPTER VIII

WHAT IS THE RELIGION OF ISLAM?

I FEEL inclined to begin this chapter with the words of General Gordon as a text: "I like the Mussulman; he is not ashamed of his God; his life is a fairly pure one."

Unlike most writers who have attempted to answer the question, "What is the religion of Islam?" I have gone for the answer to the Moslem himself, and to the Koran, and not to the Christian critic and commentator. I do not believe with one Christian writer that "Islam is barbarism," any more than I do with Locke, who holds that the Moslems are "heterodox Christians." I would rather put it in this way: "Islam is not an anti-Christian faith, but a half-Christian faith—a copy of the faith of Abraham and Moses with an ill-informed mixture of Christian elements."

For my part, I found the Koran intensely interesting, where most people (as Carlyle did) find it "a wearisome, confused jumble, crude, incondite, endless iterations, long-windedness, entanglement, most crude, incondite." This in itself is an attitude which leads to that misunderstanding which must come from want of sympathy. The most scholarly of Moslems claim that the Koran is as systematically arranged, and is as harmonious as regards sense, as any book can possibly be.

There is possibly in the world no other work which has remained thirteen centuries with so pure

a text. By the forethought of the Prophet's successors one recognised text was established, and all others were destroyed, so that the message received by the Prophet has been fulfilled—"We have surely sent down the Koran, and we will certainly preserve the same from corruption."

It is curious to notice how differently this wonderful book affects different men. "Insupportable stupidity," says Carlyle; while the whole gamut of impression is within the experience of Goethe: "As often as we approach it, it always proves repulsive anew; gradually, however, it attracts, it astonishes, and in the end forces into admiration."

It was certainly a fortunate thing, if Mohammet was to be the medium of a plenary inspiration, that he was born of a tribe renowned throughout Arabia for the purity and eloquence of their language.

It was an immemorial tradition of the Arabs that Kedar (the second son of Ishmael) and his posterity originally settled in Hedjaz, the province in Arabia which contains both Mecca and Medina. It was from this patriarch that the tribe of Koreish, the sovereigns of Mecca and the hereditary guardians of the Kaaba, always claimed descent.

In the Koran, Mohammet upholds his claim to the princely and priestly honours of his race on this very ground—as an Ishmaelite of the stock of Beni Kedar,* the Bedouins to whom there are many references in the Old Testament.

It was certainly with the tribe of Koreish that Mohammet spent his childhood, and from learning their speech he gained the power to declaim with the powerful and persuasive eloquence which has so deeply affected the hearts of men. This tribe traded

* Genesis xxv, 13.

with the Syrians.* They dwelt in tents of black hair,† in the midst of the wilderness of Arabia, and were known as skilful archers.‡

Of course, writers with a religious bias, many of whom have set out to prove that Mohammet was a black monster of pretence and iniquity, have confuted the desire to prove the Abrahamic genealogy of the Prophet. To speak of a base and plebeian origin, however, as Gibbon says, is an unskilful calumny of Christians. His descent from Ishmael was a national privilege of fable; but if the first steps of the pedigree are dark and doubtful, Mohammet could produce many generations of pure and genuine nobility.

No Moslem denies the connection between Islamism and Judaism; indeed, they deem it their highest honour to be "the followers of every true and divinely commissioned Prophet." Claiming descent from Ishmael the brother of Isaac, the Arabs are, of course, cousins of the Jews, and Mohammet, who always showed the greatest respect for Jews and Christians (unless under a temporary vexation), whom he called "the people of the Book," deemed any race which had no Bible, or could not read, as very inferior. He gave express permission to his followers to consult the Israelites in all matters on which he had not spoken to them, and to search in the Jewish books for information on that of which they were ignorant. The doctrine of Judaism, they say, received its perfection from Mohammet; Judaism undoubtedly proceeded from a divine source, and inculcated and taught the same truth as Islam—the existence and unity of God.

The Moslems believe that according to the injunctions of the Koran, confirmed by an exhaustive

* Jeremiah xlix, 28. † Canticles i, 5. ‡ Isaiah xxi, 17.

examination of the Old Testament, they are right in claiming that their Prophet was expressly foretold by the patriarchs and prophets. By much comparison of texts in the Bible and the Koran I was able to follow—in conversation with them—this contention, if not to be convinced by it.

An instance of the Moslem's attempts to make the Bible support the Prophet—I give it for what it is worth—is the statement in the prophecy of Moses: "The Lord came from Sinai, and rose up from Seir unto them; he shined forth from Mount Paran, and he came with ten thousands of saints."* Ali and his friends firmly believe that Paran means Islam.

A more serious claim still is the statement that it was of Mohammet Christ himself prophesied when he said (this is the Moslem's rendering of the text): "Nevertheless, I tell you the truth, it is expedient for you I go away, for if I go not away, the Ahmed (another way of spelling Mohammet) will not come to you, but if I depart I will send Him unto you."† This is one of Mohammet's many obvious errors of insufficient knowledge. As Rodwell says, Mohammet had no doubt heard that Jesus had promised a *Paracletos*. This title, understood by him, probably from the similarity of sound, as equivalent to *Periclytos*, he applied to himself with reference to his own name Mohammet (*i.e.* praised, glorified), from the same root, and the same meaning as Ahmed.

It must always be kept in mind that, so far as is known, there was no Arabic version of the Old or New Testament which would have been available to Mohammet, or—allowing that he could not read—to his friends. It is suggested that a man named

* Deut. xxxiii, 2. † St. John xvi, 7.

Warakah, of Mecca, translated a gospel, or a part of one, into Arabic. We might, by deduction, suppose this to be the Gospel of the Nativity. Mohammet's knowledge of the New Testament could only have been slight, for he makes no direct reference to baptism, the Lord's Supper, nor to the miracles or parables of Jesus.

Speaking of the New Testament in the Koran, he says:

> "Of old we sent Noah and Abraham, and on their seed conferred the gift of prophecy and the Book. . . . Then we caused our apostles to follow in their footsteps; and we caused Jesus, the Son of Mary, to follow them, and we gave him the Evangel; and we put into the hearts of those who followed him kindness and compassion; but as to the monastic life, they invented it themselves." *

This evangel, he probably thought, was a complete book, something like the Koran, consisting of a revelation made to Jesus by God. The answer of the modern Mussulman to the obvious questions as to their neglect of the teaching of Christ is that this evangel mentioned by their Prophet has been lost, and that the New Testament contains merely the traditions of the apostles, unsupported—of course—by any proof.

The thoughtful amongst our Arab friends declared that there is no religion more friendly to Christianity than Islam. The Prophet, Ali reminded us, has made God say: "I will place those who follow Jesus above those who believe not, until the day of resurrection. Then to Me is your return, and wherein ye differ I will decide between you."†

* Sura lvii, 26, 27. † Sura iii, 48.

This, Ali said, would answer my questions as to how we, Moslem and Christian, could stand together and pray at the tomb of Sidi Okba.

"There is another verse," said Ali, "in which the Prophet says, 'the Christians and others who believe in God and the last day, and do that which is right, shall have their reward with their Lord; fear shall not come upon them, neither shall they be grieved.'"* And a similar declaration was amongst almost the last of Mohammet's inspired words.

"It is firmly believed by learned Mussulmans," continued Ali, "that the English people sent a mission to our Prophet inquiring into his teaching, and begging that one of his followers might be sent to England. The envoy arrived too late, for Mohammet was dead. An account of the religion of Islam was sent to your country, but as the prophet was dead, you declined to abandon your own religion. Your refusal was accompanied by expressions of regard; and for this reason we have always thought the English, of all 'the people of the books,' to be best inclined towards us."

Christianity, said our Moslem friends, is superior to Judaism. The mission of John the Baptist, they agreed, is undoubtedly true. They believe, as, of course, the Koran teaches, that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, by an act of Divine will, and that he is unquestionably "the Word of God" and the "Spirit of God."

> "Oh, ye people of the book! overstep not bounds in your religion, and of God speak only truth. The Messiah, Jesus, Son of Mary, is only an Apostle of

* Sura ii, 59.

God, and his Word which he conveyed into Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from Himself. Believe, therefore, in God and His apostle, and say not "Three" (there is a Trinity): Forbear, it will be better for you. God is only one God! Far be it from His glory that He should have a Son! His, whatever is in the Heavens, and whatever is in the earth! And God is a sufficient Guardian. The Messiah disdaineth not to be a servant of God!" *

The Moslems state that the doctrine of the Trinity, which is the greatest stumbling-block to their understanding of Christianity, crept corruptly into our faith, after the Apostles, and that it is contrary to the pure precepts of Christ.

They go further, and boldly claim—I quote the exact words of a highly cultivated Moslem—that "one of the greatest merits of Islam is that it re-established the unity of the Godhead, and revived that pure religion inculcated by Christ Himself; it constantly warned the then-called Christians of their errors, and invited them to accept the true religion, a religion preached by Christ."

Next to the difficulty to the Moslem mind of the doctrine of the Trinity, is that of Transubstantiation; and, of course, the use of statuary in religious worship is repellent. An Arab friend in Biskra who spoke English, discussing the Roman Catholic Church said, "Sir, I could not enter that place"—meaning the little Catholic church in Biskra—"because of the figures, which are forbidden to us by our Prophet. And we do not like unmarried priests. Mohammet was right when he said that every strong man was to marry, and always forbade the Moslem to live a monastic life. No man can develop his character in

* Sura iv, 169, 170.

quietness until he is married. And then our Prophet said that we must not take men for lords beside God,* meaning that we must not follow priests, and bishops, and Popes, as others do, who presume to make new doctrines, and to determine what things are lawful, and what unlawful. Sir, I believe with one of our great writers—I say it with what you call deference—that the greatest of all boons conferred by Islam upon Christianity is the spirit of resistance which it breathed into Christians against the exorbitant power of the Popes."

At the same time, the calamitous ignorance of Mohammet concerning the life and teaching of Christ is deplorable, when we consider how this ignorance crippled everything that is best in his own message, and has turned the eyes of countless millions away from the Cross and the Atonement which revealed the message of the love of God, a message so infinitely greater than anything the Prophet had to deliver to mankind. We are bound to admit that the divisions that had sprung up amongst Christians by the seventh century must be held accountable for a great deal of this ignorance, and certainly for the Prophet's pity for a religion admitting of much sectarian strife, which obscured the gospel of peace and goodwill to man. "Men have rent their great concern, one among another, into sects," said Mohammet, "every party rejoicing in that which is their own; wherefore leave them . . . in their depths of error."†

Of the Crucifixion, he had heard an explanation, held by more than one agnostic sect, which he sets forth in the third chapter of the Koran, asserting that it was not Jesus Himself who was put to death on the cross, but another person whom God had made like

* Sura iii, 57. † Sura xxiii, 55, 56.

Him, while He caught up Jesus into Heaven. He was afterwards sent down again to the earth to comfort His mother and the disciples, being taken a second time into Heaven.

It is easy to see how the idea might grow in the ill-informed mind of Mohammet that his creed was an advance upon that of the Jews, and capable of bringing agreement to the many sects of Christianity, as he knew them, and reconciling Judaism and Christianity with Islam. He was, he said, the seal of the Prophets, confirming the true mission of all previous "sent ones"—of whom Jesus is the chief—from the creation of the world up to his time; and he firmly believed, I think, that he brought all the revealed religions of the earth to perfection. And as the one Prophet of the great formula, which was always to be on the lips of his followers—God is God, and Mohammet is His Prophet—his intention was forever to save Islam from division into sects.

It is in this claim that the germ of the Moslem's overwhelming pride in his religion lies, and a great deal of that dignity which marks his devotions; and here, too, is to be found the almost insurmountable obstacle to his conversion to Christianity. To the Moslem, apostasy is almost unthinkable; the matter is not one for argument. "He who changes his religion—and is obstinate in his error—kill him," said the Prophet. A female apostate may not be killed, but she may be imprisoned, and it is ground for divorce on either side. The Will of a male apostate is not valid; a boy under age may be confined until he come of age.

There seems little doubt that the one passion that possessed the soul of Mohammet at the beginning of his mission was to call his countrymen from idolatry

to the worship of the one God—the living, all powerful Being who had set aflame his own soul in reverence and worship. In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful, he called men to "flee the wrath to come." While wandering in the mountains, a solitary devotee, he had for years thought much about spiritual matters—about life, death, and the Judgment—so that when the passion of his soul became articulate, the innumerable subjects dealt with in the Koran flowed easily from a well-stored mind.

For a definition of Mohammet's religion, in accordance with my plan, I will go to a Mohammedan. This is how he defines it in his own words:

"Our Faith includes belief in God, His angels, His revelation in the Koran, His prophets, the Resurrection and the Day of Judgment, and God's absolute decrees. Our practice includes prayer (with purifications beforehand, almsgiving, fasting, and the pilgrimage to Mecca.

"The Koran always speaks in a tone of awe and reverence of the Deity, to whom it never attributes human frailties and passions; and throughout there is a total absence of such expressions and narratives as might not be deemed suitable for the perusal of modest youth.

"The religion established by the Koran is a stern and severe monotheism; it has nothing abstract and indistinct in its primary notion of the Godhead. Allah, so far from being a mere philosophic first cause, regulating the universe by established laws, is an ever-working, ever-present energy.

"It is a religion, moreover, stripped of all controversy, and which, proposing no mystery to offer violence to reason, restricts the imagination of men to the being satisfied with a plain, invariable worship, notwithstanding the fiery passions and blind zeal that

so often transported them beyond themselves. Lastly, it is a religion from which all worship of saints and martyrs, relics and images, all mystery and metaphysical subtlety, all monastic seclusion and enthusiastic penance are banished."

Seeing how seldom the Moslem can be got to put his own version of his faith into words, this is interesting; we can, of course, judge of its justice and worth by our own knowledge.

Of the ethics of the Koran we know that injustice, falsehood, revenge, calumny, mockery, avarice, prodigality, debauchery, mistrust and suspicion are inveighed against as ungodly and wicked; while benevolence, liberality, modesty, forbearance, patience, decency, love of peace and truth, and, above all, trusting in God and submitting to His will, are considered as the pillars of true piety and the principal signs of a believer.

It is often said that this is a religion of mere formalism; that it depends on acts and ignores principle; that if, for instance, the position of the body is right in its devotions, nothing is thought or said of the attitude of the soul. My own experience was that the believing Moslem is a man whose piety finds expression in all his daily life. Nothing is more clear in the Koran than that the Prophet meant his followers to "believe and *do* that which is right."*

It should never be forgotten that he drew a contrast between the conduct of his pagan and that of his believing son-in-law, to the latter's discredit.

In one of the flashes which light up the dreary waste of one of the last of his utterances Mohammet says:

"There is no piety in turning your faces towards

* Sura xxxii, 19.

the east or the west, but he is pious who believeth in God, and the last day, and the angels, and the scriptures, and the prophets; who for the love of God disburseth his wealth to his kindred, and to the orphans, and the needy, and the wayfarer, and those who ask, and for ransoming; who observeth prayer, and payeth the legal alms, and is of those who are faithful to their engagements when they have engaged in them, and patient under ills and hardships, and in time of trouble; these are they who are just, and these are they who fear the Lord." *

All through the Koran he preaches the duty of charity, but those "who give that which they give, their hearts thrilled with dread, because they must return unto their Lord, these hasten after good and are the first to win it." †

As I have shown, the definite religious acts enjoined are prayer, alms, fasting and the pilgrimage to Mecca. Little needs to be said to supplement what I have already written incidentally about all four of these duties.

The prayers, as originally fixed, were seven, but as this number was inconvenient, five were ordered: (1) at dawn, or the last hour of the night before sunrise; (2) at daybreak, or between sunrise or noon; (3) after midday; (4) between that and sunset; (5) after sunset; (6) after the departure of twilight; and (7) after midnight. The second and seventh are the ones that are not imperative—indeed they are seldom made—but the others are obligatory. It is allowable, however, to perform the second and third together, as well as the fourth and fifth, and this is generally done at Biskra. In this case there are still five prayers, though only three acts of worship.

* Sura ii, 172. † Sura xxiii, 62, 63.

The attitudes are shown in my photographs of the Great Prayer. They require considerable agility, and the performance of them five times a day has great physical advantages. The suppleness of the old men is wonderful. Ali, to tease me, often challenged me to go through the motions, which I found a great strain, although I am not yet old.

If a man is ill, and cannot raise himself, he must pray lying on his right side. If he is travelling in a dangerous place, or if he is at war, he may cut short his prayers.* He must always turn his face towards Mecca, which in the mosques is shown by a niche, called the Mehrab; the door opening into the minaret shows it to those outside. And as the Moslem makes his prayers wherever he happens to be at the time, he carries a plan, if he is likely to travel far, by which he can calculate the direction of the heavens, and so fix the right position.

The ablutions are definitely stated, and are imperative before prayer; also before the handling of the Koran, if the body has been rendered technically unclean by certain acts.

It is curious that we English should speak of the "dirty Arab," considering the exact regulations as to cleansing under which the Moslems live. Where we say "Cleanliness is next to godliness," Mohammet declared, "The practice of religion is founded on cleanliness"; it is the key of prayer, and without it no man will be heard of God. But, says one of the chief of the fathers of Islam, mere washing is only one of the four degrees of purification. They must also cleanse the members of the body from all wickedness and unjust actions; they must wash their hearts, that they may be cleansed

* Sura iv, 102.

from all blamable inclinations and odious vices; and, lastly, the secret thoughts must be purged from everything that would divert their attendance on God. And he adds that the body is but an outward shell in respect to the heart, which is as the kernel. In his devotions, again, the Moslem is reminded that it is the inward disposition of the heart which is the spirit of prayer; no outward observances will avail if performed without reverence and hope.

There are two sorts of ablution—the great and the small. The small ablution is as follows: The opening invocation is, "In the name of God the Compassionate, my intention is to make my ablutions before making my prayer." Taking a handful of water, the Moslem turns it three times from the right hand into the left, and back. If he wears a ring he takes great çare to wash underneath it. He then gargles with a mouthful of water three times, and three times expels water from the nostrils. Three times he makes a cup with his two hands, fills it, washes his face from the forehead to the chin, passing by the eyes, then by one ear and the other. He next washes three times, alternately, both arms to the elbow, beginning with the right arm. Once only he dips the hands, joined at the finger-tips, into the water, carries them to the forehead, where he separates them, to make them slip to the nape of the neck; reunites them at the forehead, washes his ears and the back part of the neck. Finally, he washes his feet to the ankles, beginning with the right foot, passing with care between the toes, which he washes thoroughly; then he purifies his fingers. This operation is only done once.

Often we saw men by the sides of the seguars going through this ceremony, after which they would

make the prayer with the greatest concentration of mind, our presence apparently being of no account.

The great ablution is imposed under certain conditions fixed by the law after various defilements in men and women, and is, in short, an elaborate way of taking a bath. It is for this reason that in Moslem countries public baths are so numerous.

In Biskra alone there are half a dozen hammams, or baths, both for men and women. As these are open to Europeans I took the opportunity of having a ceremonial bath at Hammam Cherif, opposite the Casino. I took Taïb as an interpreter, but his good offices did not save me from the most tremendous scrubbing to which I was ever subjected in my life. It was a case of "Damned be he who first cries, Hold! Enough!" and I confess I lost in the contest, for the skin of my back was not tough enough to hold out against the exhaustless vigour of the Arab operator. When I got home I was glad to have a soothing ointment applied to my flayed body.

The darkness of these baths is one of the religious requirements, meeting the Arab sense of modesty; and it needs a good nerve, on a first visit, to go into a very large hot chamber where numbers of mysterious Arab men are all the time coming in to perform—most of them declining the help of the bathmen—the great ablution. This consists of everything done in the smaller ablution; on completing which the man pours a bowl of water on his head three times, and on his right and then his left shoulder three times. Many times he goes to the great copper in the bath to refill his bowl, and pours the hot water over the front of his body from the height of the chest, rubbing himself with his hands meanwhile, so that not the smallest portion

of his body remains unpurified, finishing with his feet as in the little ablution.

The Arab believes the hammam to be a favourite resort of the genii.

The modern Arab greatly appreciates the use of soap in his cleanings. Great was Taïb's delight when I signified that he was to have a bath at my expense; his endurance (or the thickness of his skin) was greater than mine, for he came away *très très content.*

All through the ablutions the Moslem recites prayers or pious ejaculations, such as, when washing the nostrils, "Oh, my God, if I am pleasing in Thy sight, perfume me with the odours of Paradise!" The nostrils are washed because it is supposed that the devil resides in the nose during the night.

If every kind of impurity has been avoided since the last prayer, the washings are not necessary for the new prayer. The ablutions were highly extolled by the Prophet, who said (this is traditional), "On the Day of Resurrection men shall come with bright faces, hands and feet, and there will be jewels where the waters of washing have reached."

It was a pert comment to Mohammet by the early Moslems who lived the nomad life of the desert, "You tell us to wash, perhaps you will also tell us where to find the water." The answer was that, if they found no water, they were to press their open hands on fine, clean sand,* or, failing that, to rub the hands over a smooth stone, and then over the parts of the body named, saying, "It was my intention to wash."

The Arabs, as a rule, have beautifully shaped hands and feet, and as their cleanliness does not

* Sura v, 9.

end with the bare washing, they carefully cleanse and pare their nails. They have also very fine teeth, which they keep clean and white. In formally rinsing the mouth they clean the teeth with the forefinger of the right hand. The wood of the olive tree is good for cleansing the teeth and giving a sweet odour to the mouth, and was used by Mohammet, who was particular in the choice of his toothpicks. A dentifrice, scented with musk, has been used from time immemorial.

The Arab keeps what hair he has well combed, and regularly trims his beard. Almost all hair is shaved from the body, and what cannot be shaved is pulled out, as under the arms.

As the backs of my hands are unusually hairy, I fear I caused much anxiety to my Arab friends. It can be imagined how, before I was aware of their customs, I was much tried by the constant efforts—surreptitiously made—of the small boys to pull these hairs out by the roots. It was meant kindly, but I became wary, and dodged their generous attentions.

But to cover my hands exposed me to misunderstanding, for this, I discovered, was the custom of an inferior when in the presence of a person worthy of respect. Arab-like, no word of these things was spoken to me by the urchins. The hairs they simply regarded with pity and some aversion. At the covering of my hands they laughed at what they thought my playful modesty!

CHAPTER IX

ARAB BETROTHAL AND MARRIAGE, AND THE POSITION OF THE WOMEN OF ISLAM. THE OULED NAÏL QUESTION

AMONG the many pleasant youths at Biskra who offer their services to the visitor is Zackery, a quiet, dependable boy, whose home is at the *village blanc*, at El Kantara. To see Zackery smile, and to hear his invariable "Oh!" musical and long-drawn-out when he is teased, is a delight.

The season before our visit, when he was fifteen years old, Zackery had enjoyed the great luck of being engaged by Lord Rothschild. The boy has considerable native skill in natural history, and seeing a gentleman standing near the gardens with a net in his hand, he approached him with that familiar air which in any but an Arab boy would be offensive, and, taking the net, said he could catch butterflies and moths (and small animals too) very well. Without more ado Lord Rothschild (for he it was) engaged the boy, who, I believe, served him well, so that he was afterwards taken on the long expedition into the desert which was organised chiefly for natural history purposes.

When the question of payment arose, the delight of Zackery may be imagined when he found that he was to receive the fabulous sum—to an Arab boy—of fifteen francs a day. The result was that, with other good engagements, he found himself at the end of the season the possessor of 1,200 francs!

"And what did you do with the money, Zackery?" I asked.

"Oh! I went home to the *village blanc*," he replied, "and" (with an indefinable swagger) "the first thing I did was to ask my parents to arrange for me to buy a wife!"

"And what was the price?"

"Well, a boy like me generally would pay about three hundred francs. But as I was rich, my father offered four hundred and fifty for a very nice girl, *so* pretty, and of a good family. My mother told me how pretty she was, and like an ostrich's egg.* She was 14 years old; and when she came from her parents she *cried*."

"Poor little thing," my wife and I replied. "And what did you do?"

"Oh, I *slapped* her!"

"You scamp! Why, in England, if a boy hit his wife, her father would most likely thrash him!"

"Oh——!" very long-drawn and incredulous.

At dusk one afternoon we were returning to Biskra with Taïb, and happened to pass the door of his house. He went in for a moment, and, on returning to us, locked the door. We remarked on this, and asked if his mother was within.

"Oh, yes," he replied, "I always lock my women in at five o'clock!"

We murmured disapproval, and asked if it was

* This comparison of a girl of beautiful complexion to an ostrich's egg was puzzling until Ali explained that Mohammet speaks of the maidens of Paradise with large black eyes, "and resembling the eggs of an ostrich, protected with feathers from the dust" (Sura xxxvii, 47), nothing being so beautiful to an Arab as for a woman's skin to be the colour of an ostrich egg when quite clean.

not an unkind thing to do, especially when his mother was old.

Very gently, but conclusively, he said, "*C'est l'habitude.*"

"But," said my wife, "they must be so dull and unhappy to be always veiled or kept indoors, especially with so little to do."

"*Mais non, madame, c'est l'habitude!*"

And never would he make any other reply on this question of the treatment of women.

There is considerable excitement at the hotel, for Yussef, one of the guides, is, after several delays (caused by his difficulty in making up the necessary price of his bride—three hundred francs), actually at last going to be married. He explains to me that, as he has few relatives, and has been married twice before (one wife died and the other he repudiated for extravagance and for taking his money and goods and giving them to her own people), there will be no festivities to which he can ask his men friends. But, as the bride's women relatives are having a party, he invites my wife and some Canadian ladies, to whom he has acted as guide, to go to the party and see the bride.

The following is my wife's account of what happened on this visit, and also describes a visit to the wives of a marabout, and gives an Arab lady's account of an Arab betrothal, with her remarks on the position of women:—

"At nine o'clock in the evening Ahmed, one of Yussef's brothers, will come for us and conduct us to the bride's parents' house. The time comes and we set out. When we leave the well-lit streets of the French quarter of Biskra and enter the native town,

it is so dark we are glad of each other's company and assistance on the uneven road.

"The house proves to be one of the usual type, built of mud, but is somewhat superior in having properly constructed upper rooms entered from a wide roof. We stumble up the tiny staircase, lit by a candle in the hand of one of the women, to whose care Ahmed leaves us now, as, of course, he is not allowed to go further into the women's part of the house.

"Having crossed the roof, we enter a low doorway, and there, on a sort of couch made on the floor, sits the bride, ready to receive us in her bridal dress, and decked with her jewels. How young she looks, and how shy and pretty. She is but sixteen, and to-night will have to leave her parents to live with a man she has never seen, who is many years older than herself, and has already been twice married.

"Her mother and three or four other women are helping to entertain us; they show great anxiety that we should each have a cushion to sit on—even to using the two handsome nuptial cushions on which the bride and bridegroom will sit after the marriage ceremony.

"The room is lit by several candles held by the women, who sit on the floor; and for the first time I heard their curious cries of joy—the 'You-you,' made by reverberation against the palms of their hands. It is very shrill and penetrating, almost more than one can bear in such a small space. Alternating with it were marriage songs—two women sitting together, first one singing a verse and then the other answering her.

"The mother meanwhile was encouraging the little bride to show us her necklaces, ear-rings, brace-

lets, and anklets. The latter, of heavy silver, were pressed open till they would go round our ankles encased in boots. These boots seemed to give the women great amusement, and they evidently pitied us for having to wear anything so ugly in place of the beautiful anklets which on their slim limbs make such a musical jingle as they move about.

"As none of the women understood French, conversation was restricted to nods and smiles, but at the mention of the word 'Yussef' it was pretty to see the shy movement of the bride to cover her face in the delicate silver-patterned veil which fell at each side of her head. In addition to the veil, a scarf of crimson and gold was twisted round her dark hair. The single robe forming her dress was fastened at each shoulder with large silver pins or brooches, secured like a Scotch plaid brooch. It was held round the waist with a handsome gold-embroidered girdle.

"Any rings or jewellery we happened to be wearing were quickly noticed and made the subject of what was evidently admiring comment, especially if there were any diamonds to be seen! Privately, I am sure these women thought we made a poor show, as the Arab woman is loaded with quantity if not with quality.

"We found it hard to tear ourselves away from these gentle and friendly women, but the voice of Ahmed without reminded us that he was waiting to take us back to the hotel; so, leaving the equivalent of a 'wedding present' in the hands of the beautiful bride, and regretting our inability to wish her happiness in a language she could understand, we made our adieux and rejoined Ahmed, to whom, as he understood French, we could express our admiration of the bride and delight in our visit.

"On another day I visited the household of the marabout of Chetma, an oasis about five miles from Biskra. The women's rooms were at the top of the house, opening on to a flat roof. As soon as I appeared a beautiful smiling woman took me by the arm and led me to a sort of divan, on which a native blanket of bright colours was spread. While the others were talking to me in dumb show and showing me their babies, my hostess disappeared, to return in a few minutes carrying a large, handsome, brass tray on which were dates, honey—a great luxury to Arabs—and shelled walnuts. These she pressed me to partake of. It would have been the worst of bad manners to refuse, so I ate a few dates, dipped in the honey—which one might call painting the rose.

"My fountain pen, watch and rings were objects of great curiosity. I wished I could understand what they said to each other about them, and also about my hair, which, being fair, seemed to surprise them. I never saw any but very dark, often jet-black, hair among the Arab women. To make their hair look more luxuriant they plait into it coarse wool, sometimes the same colour, or sometimes with red in it, which gives a very gay effect. The thick plaits thus formed are bulged out on each side over the ears, under the head-dress. I understood from them that the wearing of false hair is forbidden by Mohammet. The ear-rings, which they all wear, are often such large circles that they could be worn on the wrist, and have to be supported by chains from the head-dress.

"Having eaten as many of the dates as politeness required, I made my adieux by saying the only Arabic word I knew, meaning 'Thank you!' several times, and turned to take up my sunshade. It felt

curiously heavy, and looking for the cause, behold, the women had slipped into it, behind my back, all the dates and walnuts I had left on the tray! In spite of my protests, the marabout himself, who had appeared again to conduct me downstairs, added several stalks of the delicious dates for which Chetma is famous.

"It was not until I had the privilege of making the acquaintance of Ali's married sister, Nakhla, who spoke French, that I could ask any questions about marriage celebrations, and incidentally find out—what I was so anxious to know—how the Arab women themselves look upon the dreadful conditions under which they live.

"The marriage customs vary somewhat among different tribes, and are modified according to the wealth of the families; but the main features are the same, and are those which were followed at Nakhla's own wedding, and will be again on Ali's marriage, which is being arranged to take place shortly.

"The first thing the parents of a son of marriageable age have to consider is—how much can they give for a wife, and, secondly, where can a girl sufficiently well-born and beautiful be found for their son? In Ali's particular case, his mother finally decides to go and see the daughter of a marabout at a distant oasis, of whom she has heard a good report. On her arrival the girl is subjected to a close scrutiny—and whose eyes are sharper than those of a mother-in-law?

"If her looks are pleasing, her health good, and her character for obedience, submission (and cookery) established, the young man then for the first time hears that he must marry, and that a bride has been chosen for him who is described as beautiful and charming.

"The son bows to the will of his father, and goes to dream of his fiancée, or, as Ali did, sadly to ruminate on his fate.

"The father then calls together his neighbours, chooses a fat sheep from his flock, and with all the accessaries for a feast in charge of a servant, starts with the cortège for the house of the bride's father, who is warned of his approach by a third person. The bridegroom stays at home, of course, in partial retirement.

"Long and ceremonious greetings are exchanged, but at last all are seated (including those who are legally required to be present, of whom mention is made later on), and with dignified and characteristic reserve conversation is made on every subject but the all-important one. In the midst of it, as if by the merest chance, the girl is asked in marriage of her father, and the conditions of the marriage are discussed.

"If the father of the bride is of an avaricious disposition, he withholds his consent in the hope of obtaining a larger sum for his daughter, and there is then a great risk of the proud and fiery temper of the Arab getting the upper hand and all negotiations being broken off, with the inevitable result of an everlasting enmity generated between the families.

"If all goes smoothly and the price is fixed (which may be anything from 200 to 2,000 francs), presents for the grandmother, mother and sisters of the bride are produced. One can imagine how anxiously the womenfolk are watching, through the chinks, for the termination of the negotiations, and how, when all is amicably settled, they hasten to prepare the kouskous, and roast the sheep, which is now killed.

"When the feast is ready, the oldest man, or the

man of highest position, present, invokes the blessing of Heaven and declares the union of the betrothed accomplished.

"From this moment the marriage, in the eyes of Mussulman magistrates, is legally made, and neither of the parties may now obtain the annulling of the contract without paying a sum equal to half the price paid for the bride. This was the old custom; but Nakhla explained to me that of late years (since the French took the country) it has been the custom for the Kaid to draw up a written certificate of the marriage. Her parents had no document, however.

"A few days after this the price fixed on is received by the bride's parents, care having been taken to make an exact list of the expenses already gone to, such as the feast, the presents, etc., in order to reclaim the amount in case of divorce later. The men of the two families, with the exception of the bridegroom, then proceed to the nearest bazaars, and with childish enjoyment buy what yet remains to be provided of the trousseau and the jewellery which it is the father's duty to bestow on his daughter.

"It seems hard lines that the bride should have no choice in the clothes provided; and when I asked Ali if she might not object to a dress for being, say, too thick or heavy, he replied, 'In that case I should tell her, "It will be good to keep you warm when the cold wind blows!"' which is as good as saying 'The matter is no business of yours!'

"The purchasers are careful to keep within the sum fixed to be spent, the amount being previously levied on the marriage gift. The next day the bridegroom's father, accompanied by his wives, children and neighbours, mounted on camels and mules, appears again at the dwelling of the bride's father,

having in his train sheep, fowls and goats to make the bridal feast. As soon as the party comes in sight the joyous 'You-you' of the women is heard, and all is bustle and hurry to prepare the feast.

"In the meantime the bride's toilet is being made.

"The Arabs have a proverb which says, 'A girl is marriageable as soon as she begins to look in a mirror.' Hence the bride may be as young as twelve years, but more usually she is from fifteen to sixteen.

"She may shed a few tears, but they are quickly dried as she sees the jewels for her adornment. Her eyes are darkened with kohla, the eyebrows are joined together by a black line of paint—thought to be very beautiful by Orientals—the lips reddened, the hair smoothed with pomade made of henna, which is also used to colour the nails of the hands. The 'melhafa,' a garment in one piece, is knotted round the body, and a white veil, fixed on the head, falls at each side and quite envelops her.

"The evening passes with joyous song and music.

"The next morning a mule or camel, decorated with gay saddle cloths, is led up, and the bride, covered by her veil, mounts and starts on the journey to her future husband, who impatiently awaits her coming. This journey, under a radiant sun, with their hearts full of gaiety and happiness, is made the occasion of much display.

"The bridegroom, affecting a calm indifference, is waiting at some distance from the paternal house surrounded by his friends.

"The bride is brought, closely veiled, to the threshold of her new home. Her mother-in-law receives her there and offers her a bowl of butter, into which she plunges her hand, and, withdrawing it,

plasters with butter the doorposts of the house, or the supports of the tent. The exact meaning of this custom seems to have been lost, but it is supposed to bring down the blessing of Heaven on the new household. It must be remembered that the bridegroom's fête is taking place away from the house, and only the female relatives receive the bride.

"The evening is passed in rejoicing; guns are fired, crackers exploded, songs and stories recited, while the music of the flutes and drums is incessant.

"Sometimes these celebrations take place in the palm garden of the bridegroom's family. During the days of them he is required to bear himself very modestly, his greatest friend directing everything for him.

"As was said of a bridegroom we heard of, 'Yes, he is very shy, but he is glad in his heart.' During the honeymoon he must hardly be seen in the streets or in the cafés.

"At last the friends disperse, and for the bride an anxious moment arrives. Alone in her room she awaits her husband, who will now see her unveiled for the first time! On his entrance a curious ceremony takes place. The husband gives to his wife a piece of money varying from ten to two francs, according to his means; then, sitting by her side on one of the nuptial cushions, he makes her take off one by one her bracelets, ear-rings and necklaces which have contributed to her beauty. Is it that 'beauty unadorned' may be estimated at its real worth? If the woman is not pleasing to him the man may at this moment decline the marriage and send the girl home. But this is not often done, for the ill-feeling created by such an act would be very deep and aggravated.

"In some countries (and, alas! several of our friends admitted the practice) the husband, to establish his supremacy, takes with him to this first interview a stick, which he places near his wife; and one is certain no words are needed to explain its significance.

"It was no uncommon sight in Biskra to see the friends of the bridegroom being invited to join in and being carried off to the festivities. Men playing drums and hautboys went from house to house, each new guest joining in the procession as invited.

"I sometimes talked to Nakhla about the women, but there never could be any agreement between us. Her own case was a very sad one, illustrating the facility for divorce which, like almost every other custom in this land, bears hardly on the women. A patient smile would come across her handsome face, a smile as nearly akin to tears as to laughter, and she would say, 'Madame, it is our custom. If my husband keeps me within doors, and takes care that I am closely veiled so that no man may see me, it is because he loves me and is jealous of my good name.* If he were careless of this, it would be unkind, and my heart would ache!'"

This seclusion and the veil are ordered in the Koran. It shows the power of the Prophet's slightest word, that all the millions of women of Islam should be thus cruelly burdened because of a little jealousy on his part of Ayesha; and of that exaggerated idea of his own importance which came upon him in the days of his worldly success, when he put his

* Sura xxxiii, 59. "That they may be known to be matrons of reputation."—Sale's translation.

own wives into a category apart from other women* and ordered them to "abide still in your houses."

What a pity that Mohammet could not have been content at the time with the veiling of his pretty young wife, and with the shutting up of his own harem, instead of adding the fateful words which bind for ever the "wives of all the faithful."

Those lamentable restrictions are, however, but a part of the deep-rooted idea in the Arab mind that the woman is but an addition to the goods and chattels of a man, important only as she ministers to his pleasure.

Many writers are satisfied that after Mohammet the position of women was worse than before. But what, may be asked, are the veil and the seclusion in comparison with all that is revealed of the value set upon women under conditions where female children were buried alive? And, as also in pre-Islamic times, a man's wives descended to his sons with other property!

But still, I think it was to the natural kindness of the Prophet's mind, and not to any real appreciation of the true worth of women, that any improvement was due. "Woman," he said, "was made of a crooked rib, and if you try to straighten her she breaks." In sterner moods he said, "I have not left any calamity more detrimental to mankind than women." Still he advises kindness: "Either keep them with kindness, or in kindness part from them";† and although he allows chastisement,‡ he never himself punished, in spite of much provocation, any of his wives with the rod. He wished the men to reprove their wives only indoors—one of the many

* Sura xxxiii, 32, 33, 59. † Sura lxv, 2.
‡ Sura iv, 38.

small things which indicate, to my mind, that Mohammet was what the schoolboy calls "a decent sort."

The superiority of men over women is declared in the Koran in the most precise language. "The men are a step above them."* "Men are superior to women on account of the qualities with which God hath gifted the one above the other, and on account of the outlay they make from their substance for them."†

The fine for slaying a woman is only half that for slaying a man, "because the rank of a woman is lower than that of a man, so also are her faculties and uses." At the same time the many critics of Islam who declare that it is doubtful if women are accredited even with souls are disproved again and again, as I have shown. "Whoso doth the things that are right, whether male or female, and he or she a believer—these shall enter Paradise." ‡

Marriage is regarded as a religious act, and it may not (in theory, as with us) be taken in hand inadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly. There are eleven conditions to be observed. The first is ability to support a wife. Marriage with persons *in extremis* is not allowed, or with persons seriously ill or in any way physically unfit; there must be a marriage gift (it is understood that "marriage" is always the union of a man with a woman, and never the reverse), and at the ceremony the representative of the woman, having the right to contract a marriage for her, must be present. The presence of witnesses is required, consisting of persons having the right to exercise authority, such as father, brother, guardian, patron, or the Arab Kaid, who contracts marriages

* Sura ii, 228. † Sura iv, 38. ‡ Sura iv, 124.

for orphans who lack representatives. The marriage must be contracted in the presence of at least two witnesses, free men, pious, and of age. If the marriage is consummated without the fulfilling of these conditions it may be annulled by the law. But it must be remembered that a father has the right to insist on the marriage of a daughter, and his authority over sons is very great, and almost unquestioned—an undutiful son being very rare.

Actual divorce by the man is rare amongst Moslems, the Koran having made it difficult, by a subtle rule intended to outwit the Arab who used to put his wife away from him and yet prevent her from having a proper release. But by subterfuges of reasoning, not at all creditable, the Moslem still gets rid of his wife very easily, and on very slight pretext, by a process called repudiation, which bears with great injustice and cruelty on the woman. If he tires of her for any reason, or merely wishes to replace her, he drives her away with a formula of repudiation; and if, in this hopeless case, she wishes a proper release, she can only get it by the money he paid for her, or a part of it, called a "compensating gift," being returned to him. To use a vulgarism, "the man has it both ways."

Divorce for the woman is of two sorts, by "release," and by the law—for her, of course, there is no "repudiation." By release, a wife may rebuy her liberty with the aid of the compensating gift, usually the giving up of her marriage portion, if her husband will consent fairly. The woman may apply to the law for divorce without the man's consent, if she proves he is physically unfit or unwilling for the married state, if he ill-treats her or beats her without reason, if he refuses her food, lodgings or

clothes, or there is any illegality in the marriage ceremony.

If the woman discovers a previous wooing on the part of the husband, even though the other lady neither refused nor accepted him, this is recognised as a ground for divorce—all previous betrothal being legal obstacle to marriage; and it is forbidden by express stipulation to promise marriage to a woman who is awaiting the time to expire for her legal release from the husband who has repudiated her.

The children of the divorced belong to their father, but their education and the maternal care of their infancy is especially confided to the mother. A divorced woman takes her children with her, and cares for them until they are grown up, but the expenses must be borne by the father. If, however, the divorced wife enters upon another marriage, the father has the right to demand his children of her. To the credit of the Mussulman is the fact that he never allows that a mother may be deprived of her children in any circumstances but these.

This dark picture of marriage, as it affects the women, I must in justice relieve by pointing to some bright spots, for in our own experience we found some happy homes, where good men—the husbands of one wife—were caring for and protecting their wives and children, where sons were cherishing their widowed mothers with great tenderness, and where women were living quiet lives secure in the love and respect of their husbands and children.

The love between mothers and sons is, indeed, often very deep. It is not a reputable thing to repudiate a wife, and there are many Arab men of gentle character to whom personal reputation and true piety are of the first value.

Unfortunately, to the bulk of the men of Islam, freedom to follow natural inclination in this matter is their last and most savagely guarded fort of paganism, against which civilisation (as the French Government is well aware) as yet dare not turn its guns.

The greatest work the Prophet did for women, after abolishing the barbarous custom of burying female children alive, was to secure for them what had always before been doubtful—the right of inheriting and holding property, and in insisting on justice being done to the widow and orphan. It is not lawful for a Moslem to be heir of a wife without her will, and the mean trick of retaining them by constant repetition of a technical marriage after divorce, just previous to the day on which the woman would be free, so that they were not really wives, yet could not be free until the dowry had been returned, is strongly condemned.*

The property of husband and of wife is regulated by common right. Marriage, instead of annulling a woman's right, gives her a civil status, assuring her a marriage portion, and leaves her to the enjoyment of her personal property without compelling her to contribute to the expenses of the household. The husband may prevent her, however, from using more than a third of her fortune in works of benevolence and charity—another thrust, I imagine, at any possible power of a priesthood, which Mohammet did everything possible to thwart.

When a Moslem wife becomes a widow she is maintained by charges on the husband's successor, and receives by right a portion, defined in the Koran, of her husband's, as of her father's, property.

* Sura iv, 23.

Mohammet also set a limit for the first time on the number of wives. A believer may not have more than four wives, or if he has slaves, the number, including his wives, must not be more than four.* If he cannot make decent provision for more, he must have only one wife.

Since the French occupation of Algeria something has been done to put a stop to polygamy by taking away from any man who indulges in it all civil rights; and as this applies to all the Arab officials and their assistants, through whom the country is governed, and all officers in the native regiments, there are, on the surface, signs of advance.

Ali's amused surprise when I asked him to gain admission for a lady staying at our hotel to the harem of the Bach Aghar, the Chief of the official Arabs, may be imagined! The lady had come on by way of Tangiers, where the harems are sometimes very "thronged."

But there can be no interference with the illimitable loophole which admits dependent women, by the sanction of the Koran—"God desireth to make your burden light: for man hath been created weak"†—and I fear in this matter there has been little advance in principle or sentiment, on which alone can any real improvement be established.

This must lead to the consideration of another phase of the woman question, on which not one word can be found in favour of the Arabs involved in it. The fact that in a small town like Biskra there are two of the native streets occupied chiefly by women of the Ouled Naïl tribe admits, so far as I can see, of no explanation favourable to the men of this race; of whom the Talmud says that nine parts of sexual

* Sura iv, 3. † Sura iv, 32.

passion have been given to the Arabs and only one to the rest of the world.

I have had reason to mention several of the misleading ideas, very unfavourable to the Arab people, which have been disseminated by English writers with little experience of their actual lives, until they have become the accepted dicta of stay-at-home folk.

In this particular matter, however, the proverbial opinion has, so far as I have read it, always been too lenient. In these lands, it is true, the illegitimate child is almost unknown as compared with our own country. But the accepted idea is that this merit, with the belief that the streets are free from the parade which is the reproach of our own cities and towns, should prevent a polyandrous people like the English from casting stones at the polygamous Moslems.

But what are the facts? Here is a people who adopt very early marriage,* to whom what stands for divorce is made easy; who are not restricted at any one time to a single wife, and yet amongst whom, at the same time, prostitution exists without —so far as I could gather—a trace of scandal or shame.

I thought at one time that possibly the stream of cosmopolitan visitors to Biskra might have something to do with the extent and quality of this quarter, but the fact that at places as remote from the track of the tourist as Touggourt (180 miles south of Biskra, in the desert) and Bou Saada, to the north, there are exactly similar streets, disproves this.

These women, called Almées, who have made by their conduct the name of the Ouled Naïl tribe so

* Since writing this I have had a letter from our young schoolboy friend Bendriss, giving me a commission to buy for him a ring for his marriage!



Photo : Bougault, Biskra

OULED NAÏL DANCING-GIRLS

infamous, come from the district between Bou Saada on the north and the Ziban on the south. They are very dark in complexion, the eyebrows being connected and several small signs being made on their faces by tattooing; they are much darkened under the eyes, and their colour is heightened by the application of grease-paint. They wear their black hair plaited and brought over the ears and generally bejewelled. Often round their heads they wear a very gay little shawl. They are below medium height, and owing to the way their bright-coloured dresses, of the simplest cut, are bunched out round the waist, and are shortened to display their silver anklets, they have a somewhat stunted appearance.

In the matter of dress the Almées never depart from that which is perfectly proper and decent; in the dance they are as fully clothed as in the street. The ordinary *décolletée* gown of the English lady would astonish them, as much as it does the Arab man. They wear an abundance of jewellery, mostly of silver, but there is one of them who struts about in a sort of trellised armour, which consists chiefly of English sovereigns, linked skilfully together. Lest this should be thought too compromising, however, I must state that this girl knew nothing of the history of these coins except that their credit was perfect, and that she admired the St. George and the Dragon side of this coin more than the design of the French twenty-franc pieces! After dancing in the café one evening she approached a French gentleman of my acquaintance, who speaks Arabic, and requested him to ask me to give her an English sovereign for the requisite twenty-five francs, to be added to her armour.

There is no more attempt at secrecy in the making

of their toilet by the Almées—it is often performed with a hand-mirror and other requisites on their doorsteps on a sunny morning—than there is of the purpose of their revoltingly suggestive and ungainly dancing in the Arab cafés in the evenings, and the sitting with the lighted candle at the doorways at night, conscienceless objects of comment to the noisy crowds passing up and down.

And what an exciting scene of pulsating, nervous life this quarter of Biskra is when nightfall has caused the little electric street lights to twinkle, the candles to flicker by the doorways, the dancing cafés to wake up to crowded activity, the while the weirdly exciting music of the hautboys and the drums makes an accompaniment to the babble, of which the explosive Arabic chatter of the men and youths as they strut critically up and down is the chief element.

The guides now appear with their European patrons, both men and women, some curious, and others obviously alarmed by the strange scene, the significance of which they only partly comprehend. Without any sign of self-consciousness, your guide, a mere lad perhaps, will point out to you the special charms of this or that Almée, stooping to lift a hand so that you may see the bracelets, or will call your attention to the beauty of the suite of barbaric jewellery worn upon the head or across the breast.

All the time the visitor of sensitive temperament feels that he is walking as it were on the heated crust of a volcano, which in an instant may flare up or explode with the overwhelming force of human passion burning underneath. True, there is a patrol of six French soldiers always on the move, but their bare bayonets seem like Mrs. Partington's mop, as, indeed, several times they proved to be during our

stay, when the Atlantic of unbridled passion overwhelmed such trifling resistance.

Remember that Biskra is a gateway of the Sahara, and that here resort men who know little or nothing of any sort of civilisation, coming from tribes who have changed little, if at all, from the old customs of Arabia, the same men whom the prophet Isaiah described as barbarous, in whose tents David, when he wanted peace, found it woe to dwell, for they hated peace.* What elemental human forces are stored up in the minds of these dwellers in the vast and awful desert, to flash and burst at the first contact with human life in the populous oasis!

Is it surprising, for instance, that sometimes these undefended women are murdered in the small, isolated chambers up the steep, dark stairs, for the sake of the gold and silver they display as part of their allurement?

One night during our stay an Arab of the desert demanded admission and was refused. Black-browed and in deadly silence he went away, to return in the deserted hour of the early morning, force an entrance, and with supple Arab hands strangle the girl in blind passion. Scorning, this man, to touch her possessions, for his passion was not that of greed, he fled away across the desert again, to find one day the grip of the law upon him as he stood in the distant market of Touggourt.

Never once did I gain the slightest clue to the attitude of the conscience of the Arab man in this matter. Unless the Almeé can be called a slave, in the sense of the Koran's use of the word (and I do not believe it), the teaching of Islam† is as clearly against it all as is that of the Christian Scriptures.

* Psalm cxx, 5, 6, 7. † Sura xxiv, 2, 3.

Ali would not discuss the subject, and always led us through the town by any way rather than down the Ouled Naïl streets. Another Arab friend begged us to forget it. But in every other way I found no sign of reticence or reserve, but a simple acceptance, as if the matter called for no comment.

I believe that when the Arab is irreligious, he, with the utmost frankness, admits no restraint of any sort on his conduct, in this or in any other matter, and only concerns himself not to be "found out" when there is a question of legal punishment. When he is bad, he is very bad indeed. But on the other hand, the pious Moslem is a man who tries to observe the laws of life laid down by his Prophet. And I must add that Mohammet constantly refers to this weakness of man, and treats it as one to be regarded leniently.

It would be very misleading if I did not state that, outside these two streets, which are easily avoided, the visitor need not fear any obtrusion of this debasing feature of Eastern life.

How deceptive and complicated a thing is human nature; how strangely mixed are its motives, and how curiously elusive it is of the assorting and labelling by which we try to fix each other's place in the departments of a moral code! How infinitely greater is it than many of the paltry categories under which we think we can register it; and how utterly worse! Who, indeed, can know the spirit of man?

On the railway station at Biskra one day I saw a little scene which will give pause to one's ordinary clear-clipped judgments of the sort so precious to the complacent ego. A tall young Arab of the tribe of Ouled Naïl was leaving Biskra, to which, with his mother, he had been paying a short visit. He

was taking back with him one of the Almées, a girl named Zora, who had been in Biskra for two or three years and was well known as being prettier than most of her companions, with the intention of marrying her—a not uncommon event, although it is strictly forbidden to marry a woman of *mauvais vie*.

Here is this girl, after such an amazing episode in her career, quietly dressed and fully veiled, being carefully chaperoned by the man's mother, while several of the Almées, with tears of sorrow at the parting pouring down their unveiled and painted faces, are clinging to her and caressing her with every sign of childlike affection, while they press upon her presents of all sorts!

The train moves off; the girls stand almost petrified with grief; then with those rending sobs, the pain of which only children know, they turn again to the town. Truly there may be "a jewel of gold in a swine's snout."

CHAPTER X

THE DANCING DERVISH AND THE MARABOUT

OF the dervish dances, a great deal has been written by visitors to the East, and in sensational fiction the thrilling horrors of these exhibitions are painted with the most lurid of "local colour."

In Biskra, of course, there is a demand for this sort of thing, and as money will buy almost anything in these countries, where it is so scarce, the guides can arrange a dervish performance any evening for about twenty francs. On Friday, the Arab Sabbath, a performance is given whether tourists—and their money—are forthcoming or not.

I was a great puzzle to Taïb and the other guides in never showing the least anxiety to see a professional exhibition of the mad dances. They would take me in the daytime to see the room in which the show is given, and would do everything possible to excite my curiosity. But I was slow to respond; for one thing I had conceived so much affection for my Arab friends, and so much respect for their religious devotion, that I detested the idea of seeing any of their race engaged in practices which, in the name of religion, degrade human beings.

One evening, however, a party was made up from our hotel, consisting of some older people and two or three girls, under the guidance of Yussef.

The room used by the dervishes is small, with one short form for visitors to sit upon, so that the

red-hot brazier for the heating of the instruments is quite close to them, and the space for the dancing is so limited that everything that is done is under their observation, as far as the dimness of the light will allow.

The younger members of this party had gone in fear and trembling, and the interior of the mysterious chamber did nothing to allay their nervous apprehensions.

A dervish and his boy subject arrived, and the latter was given at once a sort of snuff to inhale. The brazier was stirred into greater fierceness and iron bars were pushed into it. The boy, apparently under some sort of hypnotic control, began to dance, at first in a quiet way, gradually increasing his infatuated movements until he attained a frenzy which completely possessed him. His turban gave way and streamed round him, dropping to the floor, while he shook his head madly from side to side, his "Mohammet," or pig-tail, at the back of his otherwise shaven head, waving wildly and dishevelled in the air and adding to his uncouth appearance, the one garment he wore twirling like the skirt of a ballet dancer.

It was when the possession seemed complete that he, at a whispered suggestion from the dervish, pulled the red-hot iron bars from the fire and pushed them close up under his arms, where he held them tight. Snatching them again in his bare hand, he plunged them into the fire again until they were red, then, holding out his garment, he drew the red-hot iron across his chest.

Dancing himself again into a frenzy, he took a sword and thrust the point through his cheek, leaving a clean-cut hole from which no blood could be seen

to flow; then, taking a long pin—like a lady's hat-pin—he pushed this through his eyelids, with as little apparent effect.

Upon the skull of the boy the dervish now directed heavy blows with a stick, the while he danced with a fury which increased until he fell exhausted to the floor, a sign that the performance was over.

This boy did not eat a sheet of glass, as is often done at these performances, when the boys engaged will crunch and swallow the glass with apparent enjoyment.

Early in the performance one of the English girls present had become so revolted and alarmed that she fled out of the room into the street, where the fear that possessed her of the tumult and noise of the Arab quarter at night was as great as of the frenzied creature with the red-hot bars inside. She was between the devil and the deep sea. However, Yussef comforted her, and under his persuasion she came inside the door of the room again, where she stood with her eyes resolutely closed until her friends were ready to escort her home.

Our friend Ali never relished any allusion to this matter on our part, declaring that the dervishes were not of necessity good Moslems. "That," he said, "is not a true exhibition of Islam. These men impose upon the common people, but others despise them."

Then, with quiet sadness, he remarked, "At all times, and amongst every people, too frequently has weakness been imposed upon by credulity, and enthusiasm by the charlatan, by those who profane the most holy faith!"

There always have been mystics in the East, where the inclination to a solitary and contemplative life



ARRIVING AT THE DERVISH FÊTE IN THE RIVER BED, WITH NATIVE SOLDIER CARRYING THE SACRED FLAG



PREPARING COFFEE AT THE DERVISH FÊTE

is very deep; and the dervishes, when they are not mere *artistes,* have been men who hoped by a condition of ecstasy to obtain a closer relation to God. The word dervish means poor, and they are a sort of mendicant friars. Even the friends of Mohammet started monastic orders, which he condemned, ordaining that the good things of life were not to be forbidden,* and the orthodox have always opposed such orders.

All the dervishes in Biskra are not in the ranks of public performers, however, and several times great fêtes were organised, which took no account of the tourist, but were manifestations of religious zeal among the poor natives, Arab and negro, led by holy men whom the people respected.

There was no question of payment to these dervishes; on the contrary, they had exerted themselves in the same way as a Sunday School superintendent does in England when he solicits contributions for the annual treat. The dervish had gathered all the means for a great free feast—kous-kous, roast meat and bread—to which the Arab shop-keepers had contributed provisions and the well-to-do Moslems money.

Such a feast as this was that given one day at the marabout of Sidi Zerzour, the little mosque in the river-bed. This mosque is the subject of great veneration in Biskra. Here the religious recluse Zerzour lived many years since, in a little hut, and such were his powers that his frail habitation, set in the middle of the river-bed, was never touched or harmed in any way by the great floods of water which at times rushed down from the mountains and turned the river into a mighty stream. Here Zerzour

* Sura v, 89, 90.

dwelt for many years, quietly defying the forces of nature, "secure from rash assault" by virtue, as the folk believed, of his spiritual power. When he died, the mosque, or marabout, following the usual custom, was built on the site of his hut, and he was buried there; and for well over a hundred years this mosque has enjoyed the same immunity from the powers of the great flood.

About three years since one of the periodic floods swept down the river-bed with such awful force and suddenness that some ten men and boys of Biskra were overtaken and drowned, and the French masonry higher up the river was torn to pieces as though it had been a child's toy. But again the flood divided before the mosque and it was untouched.

Ali vouched for these facts, which were confirmed by French residents. Asked for an explanation, he spread out his hands and said, "I cannot explain; I can only say that the floods have come, and with all the damage done, the rushing waters went past the marabout without touching it." *

In the river-bed many hundreds of Moslems gathered, coming in groups as shown in my photographs, with banners waving; native soldiers, negroes, Arabs of every sort, with such elderly women as are allowed, because of their age, to set aside the veil. Even groups of the Ouled Naïl came to dance! It was a whole-day feast; when all the people had assembled there must have been at

* A curious point about these floods is the way the water pours into the desert, as though this were indeed a sea. In a great treacherous circle round the point at which the stream enters the sand, while the water seems to disappear it creates a quicksand, and woe betide the man or beast who sets foot upon it. Many are the stories of the victims of this circle of horror and death.

least a thousand present, and as the day advanced religious fervour ran very high.

I have a fair experience of the "treat religious," and I dare swear that the fame of this particular festival for the lavish generosity of its free provisions had something to do with the assembling of this great concourse. A whole ox was slain and roasted, and the kous-kous was prepared in the largest of "coppers," while the coffee flowed in incessant streams.

In the morning there was dancing, of the pretty and restrained sort practised by the religious women; and but for the shrill you-youing of one of the men, who at intervals called aloud to Allah to send rain, the need of which was felt by those Arabs around Biskra engaged in agriculture, the celebration was quiet and uneventful. But towards afternoon excitement grew, and when a dervish appeared with his companions there were signs of fanaticism leading to murmured threats and an occasional growl against our presence, and objections especially to our cameras; and when a great negro began to brandish a thick stick at us, I thought it well to put the kodak out of sight.

The dervish performance was much the same as I have already described—the red-hot irons, the sword cuts, the eyelid piercing, and so on. One performance, however, which raised the enthusiasm of the crowd was to my mind such a manifest trick of the cunning old dervish as to show the extent of the credulity on which these men play.

Taking a handful of sand from the river-bed, he put it into the hood of his burnous; then, going towards the brazier, he dipped his hand again into his hood and threw the sand on to the fire, when a

dense smoke and a smell of incense rose up, to the wondering murmurs of the people. If the sand had been thrown into the fire direct from the ground, how much more effective would the trick have been!

These dervish performances always lead to a great deal of argument. With regard to the hot iron, a doctor present on this occasion asserted that if the metal is sufficiently hot the trick can be done with perfect security.

We were reminded of a story of King Edward and the late Lord Playfair. The professor was taking the King—at that time Prince of Wales—through a modern factory, and when they came to a great cauldron of boiling lead, Playfair said:

"Sir, if you have faith in science, you will plunge your right hand into that cauldron of boiling lead and ladle it out into the cold water which is standing by."

"Are you serious?" asked the Prince.

"Perfectly," was the reply.

"If you tell me to do it, I will," said the Prince.

"I do tell you," rejoined Playfair, and the Prince, after he had washed his hand in ammonia to get rid of any greasy secretion that might be on it, ladled out the scalding liquid with perfect impunity.

As this subject of the dervish performances so generally leads to considerable discussion, I am not anxious to add another to the many opinions of laymen. In the year 1909, Dr. W. Langdon Brown, M.D. (Cantab.), F.R.C.P., visited North Africa and took the opportunity of watching these performances with the practised eye of a physician; and he has been good enough to allow me to give his opinion.

Dr. Langdon Brown saw a religious demonstration of the same sect as that which practises at Biskra

—the Aïssouias. As I did not see the glass eating, I will quote his description of this detail, for the rest giving only the doctor's deductions from the whole exhibition.

"Seated on the floor were about fifty men and boys of all ages. The tom-toms kept up an ever-increasing crescendo. The excitement spread, and the boys spun round in their places like teetotums. A weird, high-pitched, vibrating sound, curiously exciting in its effect, filled the room. It was produced by rapid oscillations of the tongue in the mouth, while they uttered a long, shrill cry.

"Several young men rose, and, sobbing, rushed to the high priest, a fine, dignified old man, who stood on the outskirts of the ring. In turn he drew each youth to his shoulder and whispered in his ear. They kissed his shoulder and returned with flashing eyes. A junior priest entered with some broken glass, which he put into my hands to test. It was in curved pieces, like broken wine bottles. On seeing this the youths rushed towards him on hands and knees, and roared like wild animals for the glass. He dropped it into their mouths, and they crunched it up and swallowed it; then they opened their mouths and bellowed for more. Yet I could see no lacerations and no blood. Not until all the glass was devoured was their mad hunger appeased; then they fell on their faces and remained as if in a trance.

"Though rather horrible, the whole performance had great interest to the medical mind. The idea that it is a fraud practised to get money from tourists may be dismissed; there is no compulsion (in Kairouan) to pay anything at all. Most medical men who have seen the performance incline to the

view that an hysterical condition is produced by the religious excitement, during which the acts are carried out in response to hypnotic suggestion from the priest. The absence of bleeding from serious wounds is adduced as evidence of a profound hysterical anæmia of the part.

"The chief difficulty which presents itself to my mind is how the after-effects of eating glass are escaped. That broken glass can be swallowed without pain by a hypnotised person is easily understood, but I cannot understand hypnosis preventing internal lacerations. I saw nothing to convince me that the subjects really felt any pain at all during the rites."*

Sitting in the gardens one morning, we were joined by a lad whom I had seen the day before carrying a banner in a dervish procession. He was a boy whom I disliked, for I knew he was a rogue, but this morning he looked so dazed and woe-begone that I took more notice of him than usual. In answering my questions he seemed so like a person only half-recovered from a trance that it occurred to me that perhaps the dervish dance accounted for his condition.

"Yes!" he *had* danced the night before.

"What is the hole in your cheek?"

"The sword made it!"

"Do you like to dance?"

"Yes, monsieur!"

"Does it give you any pain to do these things?"

"No, monsieur."

"Do you get money for it?"

"Yes, the dervish gives me money."

* "The Fanatics of Kairouan," in *St. Bartholomew's Hospital Journal*, Sept., 1909.

The hole in the lad's cheek was a perfectly dry one, without a sign of blood or inflammation.

Later in the day I asked Taïb why the dervish marabout chose such a bad boy for the dance.

"Oh!" he replied, "it does not matter if the boy is good or bad! The dervish tries many boys, and if he finds one who is suitable he employs him; and if a boy wants money—and does not care to work, like this one—he will often go and offer himself. No, sir, I could not do it. Not many boys can."

"Do you like to see the dances, Taïb?"

"Yes, sir!" (Taïb is proud of his English, which is growing under my tuition).

"Do you think them pleasing to Allah?"

"Oh, yes, sir; the marabout arranges the dances to please Allah."

The marabout gets little or no encouragement from the Koran, the Prophet having had a great dislike of anything likely to lead to priestcraft in any form. The natural need of the help of religious men in those simple people of the East has, however, given a place to marabouts of different orders, while the necessity of some sort of government of the church has led to the setting apart of certain men to perform the different offices. In towns and villages there is a parish allotted to each mosque, and the people may claim service of the "clergy" for marriages and funerals.

The term "marabout" is, however, of the widest application, and takes in every man who in any way devotes himself to religion, from officers of the church, and a dignified scholar of holy life like the minister of Old Biskra, to the crazed old creature who dwells apart or roams in or about the squares

and market-places, deeming it meritorious to live by alms.

A notorious man of this sort is a marabout of ebony skin, who has a tiny hut near the Hôtel Royale, and always wears a mighty turban of vivid green. He has a great vogue with Moslem women as a fortune-teller, and can often be seen surrounded by a party of them, who have come in from the country to consult him. The theory is that this man never takes money on any pretext, and only receives such provisions as are necessary for bare subsistence. But one day I caught a gratified woman, after the *séance*, dropping into his burnous hood the coppers which apparently she must not offer to him direct! Ali constantly frowned upon this man. "He is not good," he said; "and the Prophet did not approve of fortune-telling, saying, Since you have embraced Islam you must not consult such men."

It is generally held, according to a tradition of Ayesha, that there is an exalted name of Allah, which was known only to the Prophet, but might afterwards be communicated to other persons of great merit. Mohammet declared that whoever could call upon God by this name should obtain all his desires. Some of the marabouts spend much time in endeavouring to ascertain what the name really is; and sometimes one of them, declaring that he has discovered the secret, finds no difficulty in gaining great influence, which often extends over a considerable area of the country.

It is under the influence of clever marabouts that some of the great dervish sects have grown up, exerting enormous power in the Islamic world, and sometimes leading to revolts and war, as in Egypt during late years. Seeing how marvellously the influence

of a man who distinguishes himself in Islam can spread, it may be hoped that one day a truly great and good leader will arise who will hold a beneficent sway, and bring in true reform in many ways, especially doing something to improve the lot of women, and, by breaking down the bonds of bigotry, open the way to a fuller and nobler creed.

A very amusing nigger boy from Touggourt, who established himself in Biskra as an adventure in gaining a livelihood from the tourists, was Mohammet. We knew him first from his coming up to us to ask, in good French, if we would please tell him what "No, thank you," meant. He had tried to sell some native goods to a young lady in the gardens and she said "No, thank you" to all his offers, "the prettiest thing he had ever heard spoken!" When we told him the meaning of the words he joined in our amusement at the thought of an Arab admiring words of such an import. The admiration was certainly genuine, for, for days he walked about—this great muscular nigger with a mouth out of proportion even to *his* gigantic frame—imitating the sweet tones of the pretty English girl, saying to himself in delicate accents, "No, thank you!" and always greeting us with the words whenever we met. Until at last we labelled him with the words for a nickname, which I fancy will stick to him for many a day, as it met with general approval.

This boy wore, tied inside his fez, a charm sewed in a little square leather case. One day, after he had been sent by a friend of ours who had sometimes employed him as a guide, to get change for a franc, and had appropriated the money to his own use, his patron, to punish him, took his fez and tore

out the charm, saying that when he returned the franc he should have it again. Almost from that moment the nigger's spirits drooped, and for some days it was quite pitiful to see him, for he declared he had a constant headache and everything went ill with him! At last he earned a franc and recovered his charm, to his great delight, his headache vanishing and prosperity coming back to him. He had originally bought the charm of a marabout with a reputation for this sort of thing, giving quite a large sum for it.

The Arabs have a universal belief in the merit of talismans, and it can be easily seen that a marabout who becomes known for the dispensing of effective charms is in the way of gaining a considerable income, hence the temptation to chicanery.

Every child wears at least one of the little leather bags containing a charm; some have as many as four or five, the little girls seeming to require more than the boys. Grown-up people, unlike the children, wear them out of sight.

It will not do to assume that superstitions like this, especially as they apply to children, are confined to the benighted East.

Almost the first newspaper I saw on arriving in England from Africa contained a report upon the result of the medical inspection of children attending the elementary schools in Wimbledon.

"Among the younger children," it said, "it is very common to find concealed a string of beads round the neck, usually consisting of pale blue beads or coral. These are not removed day or night, and are sometimes stated to keep away infection, colds, and especially 'quinsy.' One person attributes measles to a child having removed the beads. The

custom appears to be a prehistoric one, and in some parts of England practically every baby brought to hospital is wearing such beads."

And our own cook, having a son in the navy, seriously bought for him a skein of blood-red silk (she went out in the middle of the day to be sure of choosing, in the daylight, the right colour), so that by wearing it round his neck the unpleasant weakness of nose-bleeding might be cured, "as the other sailors didn't like him making a mess of their nice clean decks."

The charms are worn by the Arabs for widely different purposes.

"To keep away the Devil at night," smilingly replied Sardoc, one of our boy friends, answering our questions about the amulet which wagged from the top of his fez. Round his neck he wore another to keep the Evil One away in the daytime.

To preserve the sight, to ensure against want, to keep off the genii of hurt and mischief, to protect against snake-bites, and many other things, they are worn. Even the animals—especially the camels—wear them round their necks.

A friend of mine found an amulet having, we imagined, a general application, for in addition to a verse of the Koran written on parchment, there were single grains of every sort of corn grown in Algeria!

The bleached bones of the camel, which are of special value as charms, are frequently seen tied to the trunks of the palm-trees, while the skull is much treasured, and is often put over the doors of Moslem dwellings, or fixed to the trunks of special trees.

Ali gave to my wife, at the end of our stay, as the rarest thing he could command to stamp our

friendship, a small silver hand of Fatima, of ancient workmanship, made by a famous marabout, which his father had brought from the holy city of Mecca itself—a treasure, indeed, which was to bring every blessing of health and good fortune!

The Prophet believed in charms, especially to avert the evil eye, which was a special dread of his; when asked if spells might be used for it, he said: "Yes, for if there is anything in the world that would overcome fate it would be an evil eye!" To meet a lame person is to encounter it. It is said that Mohammet knew a part of the Lord's Prayer, and used it as a charm for this purpose. The claw of a porcupine, enclosed within a silver case, is reputed to be an unfailing preservative against the evil eye.

Lieut.-Col. Villot says that "a talisman against the sting of a scorpion is to carry round the neck, wrapped in a piece of cloth, the hair of a little child four months and ten days old. And to ensure against a fever the Arabs write on the shell of an egg a certain formula in Arabic—words with no sense—and place the egg on the cinders of a fire until it is cooked, when they eat the egg, and gather up the shell, carefully placing it all in a blue rag, which is carried constantly on the person." I did not meet with these talismans.

The evil spirits, against whom charms are worn, take many shapes, but particularly that of frogs or toads, and their favourite machination is to flash a poisonous ray, or still worse, inject a venomous fluid, into the eyes of those unfortunate beings who attract their attention. The frequency with which maladies of the eyes occur in the Sahara gives credence to these ideas. It is against these enemies, specially, that charms are worn.

As an example of these charms I will give—of many I collected—the one used against ophthalmia. It began with the invocation:—

"In the name of the God of mercy and pity, may the Almighty be propitious to our Lord Mohammet, and his family and companions."

Then the verse from the Koran: "We have covered their eyes with a veil and they cannot see."

Ending with the formula, "In the name of Allah! By Allah! There is no other God but Allah! There is no help but in Allah alone!"

In many cases a magic square is given, this being one:—

4	9	2
3	5	7
8	1	6

which makes fifteen from top to bottom or right to left, this being much esteemed as a formula.

Yellow ink is the most effective in some cases, while other disorders yield to red and blue; and the charm should be written by a special man of reputation, on parchment, enclosed in a leather sheath, or silk bag, and the whole worn as an amulet round the neck, or attached in some way to the clothes.

CHAPTER XI

MANY SMALLER MATTERS. LAST DAYS, AND A SAD FAREWELL

THERE are several very pretty and interesting walks from Biskra, one of the most delightful being to Sidi B'kat (or Becker). Crossing the Boulevard Carnot, you take the road leading by the left side of the house of the Bach Aghar. The palms and the rippling water, and the sudden opening on the north to the mountains, with the pretty village leading to Vieux Biskra, make the objective of a charming little excursion.

The mosque of Sidi B'kat is particularly interesting, the church itself being more highly decorated and better kept than any other in the oasis; and connected with it is a school, in which a number of youths of the gentle class are being trained in religious matters, especially, of course, in the study of the Koran. It is expected, if you enter the school (which is on the roof) and talk with the pupils or teachers, that you will leave a small contribution for the marabout (the general support of the mosque and school), and you may be sure your gift will be received with a gracious courtesy. Do not go on Thursday, for then there is a general *congé* for the lads; or on Friday, for that is the Sabbath holiday.

All Arab education, without religion, is an anomaly. All consideration of knowledge is knowledge of Allah. Beyond this learning is considered

almost superfluous, or even dangerous. The religious leaders in Islam who teach are of two classes —those of an ascetic and spiritual life, who educate their pupils in religious thought, and those who, by a careful and minute study of the Koran, the traditions, and the numerous Arabic works of divinity, have attained a high reputation for scholarship. In this school at Sidi B'kat the youths are being trained in both these classes.

These lads are called "seekers after knowledge," or, as we should put it, "students of divinity," as they may possibly become marabouts. The full course in such a school would be grammatical inflection, syntax, logic, arithmetic, algebra, rhetoric and versification, jurisprudence, scholastic theology, commentaries on the Koran, treatises on exegesis, and the principles and rules of the interpretation of the laws of Islam, and the traditions and commentaries thereon.

In the junior schools the children learn their alphabet and the numerical value of each letter; then they learn, and write down, the ninety-nine "excellent names of Allah." Having mastered the spelling of words, they proceed to learn the first Sura of the Koran, then go on, gradually, through the whole book. Those who have seen the children's classes, and heard their droning as they learn the chapters from their printed boards, will realise how little understanding there is of the meaning of the book at this stage.

Having finished the Koran, his first great religious duty, the pupil goes on to the elements of grammar, with a few simple rules of arithmetic. The elementary schoolmaster is generally a man of little learning.

Another pretty village is Sidi Lhassan, about four

miles away, through Vieux Biskra, turning to the left. There is a picturesque mosque here; but the great charm is that, by walking on through the village, one comes to the open desert, and if you have previously missed, owing to the sand storms, the mirage which is one of the pleasures of the drive to Sidi Okba, you will enjoy seeing the very fine one appearing across the desert from this point.

The mirage is best seen about noon, when an immense lake of water, with palm trees, and even the suggestion of buildings, and the minaret of a mosque, are clearly enough seen to prove how easily thereby travellers in the desert might be tempted to follow the illusion. The Prophet used the mirage as an illustration in the Koran, saying that the works of unbelievers "are like the vapours [or *Serâb*, mirage, false appearance] which the thirsty traveller thinketh to be water, until when he cometh thereto he findeth it to be nothing."*

A walk to Beni Mora (a little over a mile) will take you to a little oasis of delicious-smelling mimosa trees and the only green grass to be found near Biskra. How often did we spend a morning in this little paradise, with a book, or chatting with the different members of the Arab family who do the whole work of the nursery gardens there for fifty francs a month! One of the boys there has a voice of such musical sweetness as haunts us to this day.

There is a very delightful oasis, hardly known at all to tourists, to be found in the river bed, past the French cemetery. Here the bird-life which abounds is very interesting, and there are nice, sandy walks amongst the beautiful tamarisk bushes, which lead to the streams of water coming down from the

* Sura xxiv, 39.

source, quite warm, in which, any fine day, a number of Arab men will be found busily engaged on the family "wash." Think of a climate so dry that the man's own garments are washed, hung out, and worn again within two or three hours!

These are walks that can be taken without an Arab guide.

There are many other places further afield which can be visited, and where it will be advisable to take an Arab, as the natives speak only their own language. You can go on mules and camels to Tolga (twenty miles), staying at the decent hotel for a night. The people are very primitive and hospitable. Some tourists undergo the trial of the long drive by *diligence* to Touggourt (about 170 miles), the simplest and least expensive journey into the desert. You can drive (four miles) to the sand-dunes, and the drive to the Col de S'fa takes you to a glorious sunset view.

It is necessary always to arrange to be back in Biskra, as a matter of safety, at nightfall. The bad Arab is *very* bad, and for a gain of five francs the stealthy villain will stop, under the cover of darkness, at little.

A certain visitor to Biskra last season caused great trouble to honest Arabs by refusing to recognise the possible existence of dishonest ones. He was fond of walking, and would insist, in spite of warning, on going long distances which landed him in remote villages at nightfall. The good men of those villages, on more than one occasion, would not let him return to Biskra alone. One evening three of the chief men of Filiach insisted on coming back with him and seeing him safely inside his hotel. To his surprise, when he took out his purse they refused

any sort of recompense. The good Arab is *very* good. As Ali said to me, "If harm had come to this man on the way back, the law would have dealt heavily with the whole male population of Filiach! It is a bad road; I, as you know, always carry a revolver *at night*."

With reasonable care there is nothing to fear; but it should be remembered that most of these people live very near to hunger and destitution.

The Arab children on these walks can be very troublesome. Great discretion must be shown in giving them (as everyone is tempted to) sweets, nuts, and especially coins. I have known a gathering crowd of impish youngsters increase to at least a hundred and follow two good-natured but indiscreet folk as far as Vieux Biskra. I found it a magic formula, in getting rid of the importunate, to lift the right hand with the forefinger raised, and while shaking it from right to left, to say Macache! (No!) or Makansch! (None!). It is the Arab's own way, and with Arabs very effective. The momentary shock of it, coming from a European, was enough sometimes in itself to give one the chance of getting away.

Very amusing, as I have before said, is the Arab's idea of economy. He is not without charity, but his horror of prodigality exceeds it. Ali took us one day to see his family garden, which, like all gardens here, is in charge of a guardian—with a gun—who has a small mud hut in one corner. The man attended us and answered many questions about the network of little canals watering the palms, and other details, and eventually, at Ali's command, swarmed up a tall palm tree and slid down to earth again from the top by

means of one of the branches, which bent with him until he was about ten feet from the earth, when he dropped, to our great astonishment, just to show "how it was done." In leaving I slipped a franc into the man's hand, hoping—but in vain—that his master's sharp Arab eye had not noticed what the coin was.

"Oh, sir, you gave him too much! Allah says 'Be not profuse.'* Now the man will neglect his work and swagger for days in the cafés."

Poor wretch; I expect it *was* a small fortune. But who could begrudge him the little swagger it might possibly represent?

And, as I reminded Ali, the Koran also says, "Be not niggardly."†

I have spoken of Messoud, who was going to "walk about for three months." His patron talked to him on a second occasion about thrift.

"Sir," he answered, "if when I wake in the morning I have twopence, then I am perfectly happy. I spend a halfpenny for a piece of bread for breakfast, a halfpenny in the middle of the day, then I have a penny left. Shall I have no faith that Allah will send me what is necessary before night?"

Does not the Koran say, "The heaven hath sustenance for you"?‡

The Arabs are liars—much as the Irish are; like them they can be anything rather than ungracious, and they are even more sagacious and penetrating in the way they can divine what you would like them to say. The Prophet hated nothing more than lying, and whenever he knew that any of his followers had

* Sura vi, 142. † Sura xxv, 67. ‡ Sura li, 22.

erred in this respect he would hold himself aloof from them until assured of repentance. It is said that Mohammet stated, "When a servant of God tells a lie, his guardian angels move away from him to the distance of a mile, because of the badness of its smell."

The Arabs are so fond of verbal jokes, especially if they have a personal application, that the Prophet thought it necessary to warn them: "Do not joke with your brother Moslem to hurt him." And many a punning joke did we have in Biskra. Mohammet enjoyed a jest himself, and I am sure would have appreciated that English want of humour which enables us to name an ugly *cul-de-sac* in one of our slums "Paradise Court," or the "dullest of no thoroughfares," like that in which Miss Tox lived, "Princess Place." The Prophet teased his followers once: "You really must not call your slaves Yasār (abundance), Rabāh (gain), Najīh (prosperous), Aflah (felicitous). Think what your grand visitors will say if you call for one of these servants and he be not in; you will be told that abundance, or felicity, and so on, are not in your dwelling."

On a certain evening, when the stars were shining with that brilliance which is known only to the southern skies, two or three Arab boys, including Taïb and Zackery, were sitting very quietly on the seats in the garden facing the hotel. A friend and I joined the group, and as the stars were mentioned we gave the lads a brief outline of the heavenly system. With quiet respect they listened to what we had to say, and although Taïb was evidently incredulous, and Zackery with a winning smile made his usual comment (the long-drawn Oh!), which did not mean

assent, but suggested rather that messieurs were "pulling his leg," they heard us to the end.

Taïb's reply was very characteristic of the Arab mind, so placidly secure in an absorbing pride, which the casual observer so little suspects, and yet so tolerant of the things that European folk babble of so grandly (and with such ignorance) in the name of learning and of science. Taught in the Koran almost exclusively, that sole source of true knowledge direct from God, these people can afford to be tolerant of and quiet with folk like us, who think we can find the great things of Nature out for ourselves, and are bold in our assertiveness, and inclined—even the best of us—to that pride of bearing which ought to mark "God's Englishmen."

"Sir, *Ce n'est pas possible!*" was Taïb's gentle conclusion. "God made seven solid heavens, one above the other. The moon was hung by Allah from the lower heaven as a burning lamp, and the stars were hung to adorn the lowest heaven with lights and to direct travellers through the forests and over the desert and the sea, and to stone the devil with."

"Haven't you seen the shooting stars?" he continued. "They are thrown by the angels, who keep guard, when a devil approaches too near to heaven."

"Oh, no, sir," pointing to the sky, "the lights are all *hung* from heaven. What you say is *impossible!* And those are wrong, too, who say the weather is ruled by the moon or stars, for it comes from Allah!"

And in the Koran there is warrant for each of Taïb's statements. Mohammet condemned those who studied the stars for any other purpose than those the boy stated.

But, curiously enough, in spite of this, modern

astronomy is indebted to those Arabs who were called Saracens for the introduction of exact observations of the heavens.

In Islam every man has his own star, which first appears when he is born, and when it goes out he dies. It grows paler and paler, till none sees it but he, and then he knows that his end will be very soon.

Moslems believe that the earth was created smooth and flat, and to keep it firm God put the mountains on it as stakes. The sun is like a traveller who goeth every day to his place of rest. "For the moon have we appointed certain mansions, until she change and be like the old branch of a palm tree."* The mansions are the twenty-eight constellations, through one of which the moon passes every night. The yellow and drooping branch of the palm tree may well suggest the crescent moon.

One habit of English folk which filled Arab friends with sorrow was that of constant comment on the weather, and especially our grumbling. The poorest guide, insufficiently clad, and possibly hungry, would quietly resist our adverse remarks.

"Ugh!" we would say, "what a cold wind!" Or, after one of the rare falls of rain, "What shocking mud!"

"But monsieur surely knows that Allah sends the wind and the rain!" would be the invariable reply.

During the whole of the winter—an exceptionally trying one, from the prolonged cold winds—I never heard an Arab utter a grumbling word at the weather. And yet, of course, after the terrible heat of summer,†

* Sura xxxvi, 39.

† Writing to us on July 4th, 1910, Ali said: "In Biskra the heat is very great. The temperature is at 47 to 49 degrees centi-

these bitter blasts from the high snow-covered mountains at the north must be much more trying to them than to us English grumblers, after the rigours of "an alleged summer" at home.

But if the Arab does not grumble about it, I think no one knows the depth of his dislike, and even actual fear, of certain winds. For the slightest breeze he will cover up his mouth and nostrils, and will make it the reason for postponing a journey. I was convinced that much of this dislike is founded on religious grounds, and this Ali confirmed.

A very deep impression had been made on Mohammet's mind by the story of the hot and suffocating wind by which the tribe of Ad had been destroyed. It blew seven days and seven nights, killing these people as it entered their nostrils and passed through their bodies. He went in dread of a recurrence of such a judgment on the earth. Ayesha related that when a wind was blowing from the same quarter the Prophet would turn pale and walk to and fro outside his house, his alarm lasting till the storm subsided. When she expressed surprise he said, "Oh, Ayesha, peradventure these winds will be like those which destroyed Ad."

Wednesday is the day of ill-luck to Moslems,* the day on which judgments are sent upon the wicked. It was on a Wednesday that this cruel wind began to blow; and to this day a wind on a Wednesday is an occasion of dread. The muffling up of the face is an

grade [about 116 to 119 degrees Fahrenheit] in the shade. The Hotel Sahara is shut. The French are all gone, and many of the Mussulmans are gone to the hills; no one remains here except the very poor and those who—like myself—can support the great heat. Biskra is now very silent: no sound, no French music, only Arab flutes playing all night in the *grande allée* of the gardens."

* Sura xli, 15.

immemorial custom, strongly confirmed by Mohammet. On one of his expeditions, passing through the ill-fated valley of the tribe which had been so severely blighted, he muffled his face, and, calling upon his followers to do the same, galloped away at full speed.

On the *diligence* one day an American and a Frenchman, who were passengers, not being able to forget a strident commercialism, talked long and loud about trusts and monopolies. Ali was travelling with me, and as the talk proceeded became grave with that impenetrable expression which certainly has a suggestion of haughtiness in it.

"What sort of men are these?" he said to me later. "Do they not know how *wicked* it is for any man to monopolise the necessities of life? Mohammet said, 'Those who keep back grain in order to sell at a high price are cursed.'"

I said nothing, but felt ashamed, in the face of this reproof, that some great truths should be so much more respected by these men of Islam, whom I had heard English people dismiss as "barbarians, every one of them," than by the great civilised nations of the West.

The sand diviner is an institution with whom the romantic writer makes great play. A "fortune" for half a franc is a cheap form of amusement, and most ladies among the visitors to Biskra indulged in it. Occasionally the "diviner" had good luck, but I was always surprised that, considering the powers of penetration of the Arabs, the thing was not better done. If these men would only confine themselves to character reading, they would astonish and amuse their patrons much more than by undertaking to

divine the future. I saw no single sign of that marvellous penetration by which the English girl becomes spellbound, after a *séance*, of which one reads in fiction. Nor have I heard of any important forecast being verified; which seems a pity, considering the beauty of the bridegrooms and the magnitude of the fortunes so generously held in store by that future whose secrets are literally supposed to be written in a peck of sand.

Biskra is famous for its dates, and naturally one hears a good deal about the culture of the palms from Arab acquaintances. The harvest was in full swing when we arrived in November, and it was very interesting to visit the gardens where the fruit was being gathered, and especially to see the great caravans of camels laden with dates in boxes and skins which came in every day from the distant oases of the desert. All the great camel yards were full at night, and many of the caravans had to bivouac in the open spaces.

The varieties of dates grown in Africa are infinite in number, and the crop of the trees, of course, varies in value. I believe, from different inquiries, I am right in saying that the average yield per tree is worth about eight francs, although a very special tree will sometimes produce over thirty francs worth of dates. As there are about 300,000 trees in the Biskra oasis, it is easy to understand how important the crop is to the population. In 1909 it was a failure, and dire indeed was the distress among the Arabs of the whole country, actual starvation overtaking many of them. Many were driven to highway robbery by their sufferings. The *diligence* to Tolga was stopped, and when the terrified passengers offered their money

the Arabs said they wanted only any food the vehicle might be carrying.

The French Government exacts a tax of half a franc for each tree bearing an average yield, an easy way of raising toll from a primitive race, and a just one, considering the service to irrigation which the Government renders.

For all Mohammet's marvellous power over the Arabs, Nature has proved too strong even for his control in some things. He prohibited the raising of money on the security of a coming crop of dates. But as the life of the Arab is a day-to-day affair, it follows that he cannot wait for anything to mature on which money can be raised. Here is the Jew's opportunity. The yield of almost every date tree becomes the property of the Hebrew capitalist long before harvest, for the reason that he has been willing to advance half the value (or rather of a price agreed upon, which is greatly in favour of the buyer), the other half to be paid on gathering.

I only met one or two Arabs who were superior to this arrangement, and they were rich men, because they were able to sell their own dates in the best market.

The palm tree lives several centuries. It is of two sexes, and the sex shows itself in the spring at the moment when the blossoms begin to open. It is reproduced by suckers, which are always of the same sex as the tree from which they proceed, and it is planted in March. In April the blossoms open, and the fertilisation of the female tree takes place. In some cases a man climbs to the top of the female tree and shakes over it the blossoms of the male palm. When the operation is to be done more carefully the necessary portion of the male blossom is inserted into

the other flower, and this is kept in place by a light ligature, which is soon snapped by the growth of the fertilised flower. One man alone can fertilise fifty palm trees or more in one day. One male palm supplies fertilisation for two hundred trees. The female palm (called Nakhla) is the symbol of grace and beauty to an Arab, who often gives this name to a daughter.

A certain number of the branches of each tree wither every year, turn yellow, and droop to the ground; these are cut off and are valued as fuel.

The palm tree is known to have only one disease; this is caused by a big larval insect with a black head and white body. It attacks, by choice, the finest trees. The remedy employed is made of water, salt, ashes and earth, which are heated and placed in the top of the tree in such a manner that the mixture will penetrate into the heart of the tree.

If a tree is getting old and infertile a cut is made in the bark and it is "bled." If it has become quite infertile, the whole top of the tree is cut off; soon new branches appear, and the tree becomes capable of bearing fruit again. When the old tree is cut the sap that first issues is gathered, and it makes an agreeable drink, either fresh or fermented.

At Biskra there are trees that have been operated upon in the drastic manner described as often as three times, but it is the exception for a tree to survive it more than twice.

A palm tree sells for from five to a hundred francs. In the Oued Souf district the price of a tree is as high sometimes as 200 to 250 francs; while at Sidi Okba, being further north, and where the water supply is poor and irregular, the price is low. The Biskra date fresh from the tree is a delicacy which you

must go to Biskra to enjoy. But for sweetness the little black date that comes from Touggourt excels all others.

The date which to the Moslem is worth its weight in gold is that which comes from Medina. It is in itself a very delicious date, and when brought back by a pilgrim from the Holy City is highly appreciated. The Medina date was the favourite food of Mohammet, who always broke his fast with it.

A French company many years ago took in hand the scientific management of the water sources of Southern Algeria. Biskra and other places greatly benefit from their efforts, and they have created, by their knowledge of water sources never before suspected, entirely new oases in the desert. At Filiach —a nice walk—their work of development may be seen in operation.

In the Koran, naturally, the date palm is often mentioned. When the Prophet wished to find a simile to express a trifle, or less, he frequently spoke (so often as to bore one) of "the skin of a date stone."

> "Shall they have a place in the Kingdom who would not bestow on their fellow men even the dent in a date stone?" *

is another of the several variations of the same idea.

But in Biskra you will often see children with a number of date stones in a bottle of cloudy-looking water, which they constantly shake, doubtless with the intention of adding to the quality of the liquid! They declared that it was *très douce*. And nearly always in the market-place there were a number of children grubbing in the mud and refuse for discarded date stones, which they told us were to be

* Sura iv, 56.

given to the camels to eat! Who would not sigh for half the digestive power of the camel, a quality to be prouder of than those belauded internal water-bags of which so much is written in the school lesson-books.

In Christendom we often read of kings washing the feet of the poor. In Islam the same religious sentiment leads men of high estate to perform acts of personal service to the lowly and unfortunate, this custom having a further effect in reducing the signs of social difference between them. I remarked on this to Ali, who agreed, and, as usual, went at once to the root of the matter.

"Our Prophet always identified himself with the poor and needy. In his own days of want at Medina, if anyone, pitying his pale face, sent a present of food, he immediately shared it with 'the people of the shed'—the homeless refugees who had followed him from Mecca and who had no shelter but the poorly-built mosque with the leaking roof and the mud floor." To the end of his life Mohammet would do the most menial work for himself—tar his own camel, and brand with his own hands the camels and sheep given as alms. It is the usual thing with a Moslem going on a journey to ride on the same camel as his servant, or slave, and walk by turn. Omar, even after he succeeded the Prophet, used to lead by the nose-string, in the burning sand and scorching wind, the camel mounted by his slave, whose turn it was to ride. Fatima used to sit with the female slaves and grind the wheat equally.

Next to the date in importance, in the Sahara, is, of course, the camel. It figures in all the litera-

ture of the East, and supplies figures of speech which are on every tongue. The stories about it are endless.

Passing a caravan of camels, Ali took hold of one of them, and when it lifted its nose, showing what looks like a split, he said to us, "Look, that is the camel's smile. When God created the first camel, the beast was lonely, and a genie whispered to him that God was going to create for him a spouse, and he smiled so broadly that his nose split down the middle; and it has remained so ever since!"

The site of the first mosque of Islam was determined by the place at which the Prophet's camel, Al Kaswa, halted of her own accord. Bedouin tribes are often guided in their migrations by the instincts of their camels; so the Prophet often trusted to the judgment of his. He always insisted that the creation of an animal so marvellously adapted to the necessities of the East showed the perfect wisdom of God. "Consider the camels"* was a favourite text to the unbelievers.

In the native market at Biskra you will always find camel's milk on sale. The flesh is considered a delicacy. To the Jews camel's flesh is forbidden,† and when the Prophet tried to make an agreement with the Jews as to food, while he made the swine anathema, he did not venture to strain the Arabs' predilections so far as to prohibit the camel.

The camel is used for sacrifice on great occasions, especially on the pilgrimage to Mecca, "when ye slay them standing on their feet in right order,"‡ meaning that one of the forelegs is doubled up and tied, which is the manner of hindering camels from leaving the camp. The law of Islam is that the

* Sura lxxxviii, 17 (Sale's translation).

† Levit. xi, 4.

‡ Sura xxii, 37 (Sale's translation).

person leading a string of camels is responsible for anything they may injure or tread down. It is eligible to cut the animal's throat in slaying it, but it is more desirable to spear it in the hollow of the throat near the breast bone, where there are three blood vessels combined. This was the custom of Mohammet.

Very interesting are the Arab ideas of jinns or genii, who, they are taught by the Koran, are an intermediate order of creatures, capable of salvation as men are, who eat and drink and are propagated and die. Some of them are good, and some are very bad, being mischievous, reprobate, and infidels. To them were sent prophets of their own race to deliver Mohammet's message. They are said to become possessed of the secrets of the future by surreptitiously stealing behind the veil.

The genii become invisible at pleasure by a rapid extension or rarefaction of the particles that compose them; or they can suddenly disappear into the air or the earth. They are, however, not all of one species; there are, in addition to the genii, an order of fairies, certain kinds of giants, and fates.

Some of the jinns have the power to appear in the form of snakes, so that the Prophet gave an order that snakes and scorpions are only to be killed outright if they intrude on a man's prayers. On other occasions a Moslem must require them first to depart, and if they refuse, then he may kill them. It is related that Ayesha, having killed a serpent in her chamber, was alarmed by a dream, and fearing that it might be a Moslem jinn, she gave in alms, as an expiation, a sum equal to the price of the blood of a believer.

A special Sura of the Koran was given as a charm against one's enemies, whether Satan, jinn, or man: "I fly for refuge unto the Lord of men, the King of men, the God of men, that He may deliver me from the mischief of the stealthily withdrawing whisperer [the devil who withdraweth when a man mentions God], who whispereth evil suggestions into the breasts of men, against genii and men." *

A pious Moslem almost always, when he mentions the name of Mohammet, says, "On whom be the blessing [or peace] of God!" In trouble and affliction they say to themselves, and to each other, "We are God's, and unto Him shall we surely return!" Before reading in the Koran they say, "I have recourse unto God." Our friends never spoke of future plans without saying, "If Allah will!"

Those who know the nomad Arabs say that they are possessed of a love for the desert that is passionate and inextinguishable. They love that perfect solitude where even the birds, more afraid of the desolation than of man, come to rest close to the caravans. We have ourselves heard much of "the call of the desert" of late years, and many a man—and woman—weary of the stress of life in our crowded and over-strenuous communities, has gone out, fascinated by the idea of overtaking the secret charm which breathes in the vast and silent plains, to come back reinvigorated in body and restored in mind.

In Biskra it is quite a simple matter to arrange for a desert caravan. Messoud ben Akli, the charming Kabyle who keeps a shop for the sale of native goods in the Rue Berthe (on the left-hand side going

* Sura cxiv.

towards the statue of Cardinal Lavigerie), and is, as I and many friends proved again and again, in every way reliable, has great experience in the organising of caravans. His patrons return from their expeditions delighted with the foresight with which every detail has been arranged, with the men he sends, their attention to bodily necessities, and their social qualities, which make the encampment every evening gay with song and dance and all the quips and cranks by which happy folk can create a genial atmosphere for those around them.

In coming out of any house or building, the Moslem turns towards Mecca; he does not mention the fact, and it may be some time before the instinctive turn which he makes is even noticed. After having prayed at a tomb, or left any sort of offering at a shrine or holy tree, he will never look back, for some reason which I could not get explained.

The adult Moslem does not play at any game of which violent exertion or rapid movement is a feature. There is a tennis court by the river bed, made for the military officers, I believe. The Arabs mimic with delight, and much exactness, the cries of those who play the game; but when I asked Ali if he played he quietly said, "Such games are for the young, or for Christians if they care for them; the Prophet said that all amusements are vain for a Moslem except three—the breaking of his horse, the drawing of his bow, and the enjoyment of the society of his wives."

I have mentioned the extent to which they play dominoes, and their marvellous skill, which, to an ordinary European, seems something like divination.

The Arabs are extremely fond of travelling. "Will you take me to London?" is a question I was asked many times. One day an Arab lad, to whom I had scarcely spoken a word, and who knew little French, addressing me as "Sidi," tried for some time in vain to make me understand what he had to say. At last, in despair, I gave him a piece of paper and a pencil, and he wrote, very badly, "Vous et moi à Londres?" Ali is to come to us in England when his "economies" have provided the means. A common Arab saying is, "Voyaging is victory!"

To the tent-dwellers the dog is a necessary evil for their protection, for few Arabs like dogs. Who can ever forget the sound of the nomads' dogs at night at the tents across the river-bed at Biskra? I only knew one Arab who kept a dog as a pet. Ali would not touch a dog on any account. Mohammet detested dogs (notwithstanding the "dog of the cave" to which I have referred), and was on the point of making an order for their general extinction. They are "unclean" animals, and when one of them drinks out of a vessel it must be washed seven times, the first cleaning to be with earth. Moslems, like many Europeans, believe that when a dog howls near a house it foretells death, for dogs can distinguish the awful form of Azrael, the Angel of Death. In Norfolk I have heard of exactly the same superstition, except for the name of the angel, firmly believed in by the poor folk.

Dogs, however, may be lawfully trained to hunt. The sign that the training is complete is that the dog catches the game three times without killing it. The dog (also the hawk) must always be let slip with the ejaculation, "In the name of Allah, the Great Allah!" otherwise the game seized by it is not lawful food;



Photo: Bougault, Biskra

A FALCONER

which words must also be pronounced over all animals when killed for food, to make the meat lawful.

The love of horses is deeply inbred in all Arabs; the inherited passion of the Prophet for them is still shared by all his race.

Mohammet, to his credit, taught the duty of kindness to dumb creatures at a time when such teaching was new. Let Christians ponder that the Moslem is forbidden to employ living birds as a target for marksmen!

I have heard that in some Moslem lands, such as Morocco, there is great cruelty to animals. At Biskra I saw little of this, finding that the Arabs were quite aware of the fact that it was wrong for them to ill-treat their camels and mules, that their Prophet had forbidden all cruelty. It is even related that when some of his people had set fire to an ant-hill Mohammet insisted on its being extinguished.

The long manes and tails of the Arab horses, which we so admire but never copy, are due to Mohammet's humane order that they were to be left uncut, the tail as the natural protection against flies. Horses must not be hit on the cheek by a good Moslem.

Ali told us several amusing stories of animals. When we asked him if animals went to heaven he said, "The question was considered by Allah a long time ago, and all the animals were asked if they wished to enter Paradise. They at once all said yes, except the donkeys. These were cautious, and asked if little boys went to heaven. The answer being yes, they replied, 'In that case, with all respect, we prefer to go to—the other place!'"

Up to Mohammet's time it had been the custom to tie a man's camel to his grave, where it was left to

perish of want. This he abolished. The evil eye had been propitiated by the blinding of a certain number of the flock or herd; this cruel custom, too, he stopped, as well as the tying of burning torches to the tails of cattle to conjure rain from the heavens. He also forbade that the Arabs should draw blood from a live camel for human consumption. When pressed for food on the long marches, as one of the last resorts, they had drawn the camels' blood, and, mixing it with chopped-up camels' hair, had cooked it in skins as a sort of sausage.

Having established Friday as the holy day (he did not desire to copy the Sabbath altogether), the Prophet proceeded to glorify it, saying it was appointed by the command of God, while at the same time he made the conditions of it fairly easy. In all his arrangements for Islam Mohammet never ignored the importance of trade. Even on the great pilgrimage the Moslems may turn their travels to profit, if the chance comes.

The believers must assemble in the mosque on Fridays and recite two rik'ahs of prayers and listen to the oration at the time of midday prayer.

Friday is the best day on which the sun rises, the day on which Adam was taken into Paradise, and turned out of it, the day on which he repented, and died. It will also be the day of the Resurrection. There is a certain hour on Friday (known only to Allah) on which a Moslem obtains all the good he asks of Allah; from which it will follow that the pious will pray all day, and the wily amongst the marabouts will lay claim to such profitable divine knowledge.

After making the stated prayers the Moslem may

use the rest of the day in trade and ordinary worldly occupations, although it will be better if he refrains. In any case he should "oft remember God." *

There is a very human element in the story told of Mohammet (to which he himself possibly refers in the Koran); he was preaching one day when a procession—was it a circus, I wonder?—went by, with trumpets and drums. This was too much for the Arab mind; the congregation almost to a man fled from the mosque. Mohammet's next text was, "The reward that is with God is better than any sport or merchandise. And God is the best provider." † Which might suggest that there was travelling with the circus one of those "cheap-jacks" in whom country-folk delight.

The Arab has a deep appreciation of the beauties of nature, which is fostered by many splendid passages in the Koran; the song to the sun and his noonday brightness, and to his redness at the hour of sunset; the glory of the mountains and the sea; the beauty of the sky; the wonder of the birds, "subject to God in heaven's vault." A wonderful psalm on the benefits of God is that called "The Merciful" (Sura lv). Here, from another psalm, is a beautiful passage:

"It is God who sendeth the winds and uplifteth the clouds, and, as He pleaseth, spreadeth them on high, and breaketh them up; and thou mayest see the rain issuing from their midst; and when He poureth it down on such of His servants as He pleaseth, lo! they are filled with joy.

"Even they who before it was sent down to them were in mute despair." ‡

* Sura lxii, 10. † Sura lxii, 11. ‡ Sura xxx, 47, 48.

The following words of a Moslem writer show this love of nature: "I will never recline beneath the shade of a spreading tree, and view the fields gay with flowers, the corn waving in rich luxuriance, or see the distant forests, without joyfully remembering that it is my God and heavenly protector who has thus clothed the creation in beauty."

The dress of the Arab is no more a matter of chance or fashion than the other details by which his life is regulated and controlled. Until I had gained some knowledge of the rules to which all Moslems conform, even in their clothes there were many puzzles. In the winter the shivering Arab, still clad in the thin cotton garments which sufficed in summer, looks with longing upon the warm clothes of the European, and, Arab-like, does not hesitate to ask for them to be transferred to his own wardrobe. I used to tease the lads by offering to give them my hat; which engendered more disgust sometimes than even their good manners could cover. The Arabs will wear any garment you like to give them except a hat; never once did I see even the poorest Arab in any sort of European headgear. The fez or turban, or both, are absolutely universal.

The European trousers tried them most, for on no account must they wear long garments, of any sort, coming below the ankles. It is a sign of unforgivable pride. Fancy the plight of a boy of four feet ten, say, in trying to wear unaltered the trousers of a man of six feet, and to conform to this ruling at the same time! They did it, however, and, whatever the result in other directions, the ankles were always free by four or five inches.

The Moslem must not wear gold ornaments, and

he ought not to wear silver, other than a silver signet ring on the little finger, and all rings are forbidden on the middle fingers. The Prophet once wore a gold ring, but it distracted his attention when preaching, so he discarded it for a silver ring, which has ever since been the correct wear. These restrictions do not apply to women. The Prophet always preferred plain clothes, would not wear silk, and was once so worried by a new spotted garment that he would not wear it again.

At a first glance one would not suppose, as is the case, that the Arab garments are designed almost entirely "to defend you from the sun."* But Ali and all our friends were firm that this was so. Without their form of covering the head, they declared, the sun in summer would kill them; and as the custom seems to have come down almost from the beginning of time, experience must have dictated it, I should imagine. Sometimes the turban is as long as twenty-four yards; those worn in Africa, however, are not so long as this. It is made a sign of authority and honour. The addition of the rope of camel's hair is generally the sign of social position, as it is very costly—reckoning by the Arab standard—a heavy rope costing as much as £5. There are said to be no less than a thousand ways of binding the turban; and as different races are at once distinguished by the *style* of binding, so is the character of each individual wearer betrayed by the manner of wearing it.

There is no express injunction from the Prophet about binding the head, but it is generally held to be more modest and correct for a man. In the case of women there is an imperative law, for Ayesha relates that Mohammet said, "God accepts not the prayer of

* Sura xvi, 83.

an adult woman unless she cover her head." For a man it is generally thought that it is abominable to say the prayers with the head uncovered, if from laziness; but it may be done from humility. It is a sign of great disrespect to receive a visitor with head uncovered.

The men have their hair shaved in three different ways, some having about an inch (or a little more) taken off the edge of the hair all round the head, so that the turban will cover all the hair; others have the head clean shaved; while others, again, have all the hair shaved except a long lock on the very centre of the crown—a virtual pig-tail—which is also very carefully tucked up and covered by the turban. The use of this tail, called a "Mahommed," is not clear. There is an old idea that the Angel of Death will, on the last day, bear all true believers by this tuft to Paradise. By others it is said that it was grown to save the Moslem, should he fall into the infidel's power, and be scalped or decapitated, from having his mouth or beard exposed to defilement by an impure hand.

Mohammet wore a beard, but there is a general feeling that the patriarchal ornament may well be left to the Jews. When the Arab is old, however, he ceases to shave his beard, but he never neglects to keep it trimmed. But the Arab ridicules the European who shaves off his moustache. If you displease them, they think they are very scathing in asking you, "Why, then, do you shave your upper lip?"

A curious point is that little bells, as ornaments for children, in any form, are strictly forbidden. "There is a devil in every bell," they say. To my cost I discovered this when I offered a small boy friend a pair of horse-reins. The child shrank from

the thing, and the father was hard put to it to get out of a dilemma in manners without telling the direct truth—which the Arab never does if the explanation of a native belief is entailed. It was some time before I found the truth—and made amends.

Henna is used very largely, especially on festive and great religious occasions. Taïb did not as a rule stain his nails, but one day he appeared with clear evidence that he had dipped his right hand, thumb first, deep into a bowl of henna. He pleasantly evaded all explanation, and when driven hard by a friend who did not know him as well as we did, he actually declared (with some remembrance apparently of a medical fact gathered from a patron) that it was *iodine* that he had used, for rheumatism!

The women constantly stain both the hands, and sometimes the feet, and religious men dye their hair and beards with henna, as the Prophet did. Indeed, the use of this juice of the Eastern privet is a religious custom.

Three or four weeks before our delightful stay in the oasis came to an end the shadow of parting was over us. A strange and almost inexplicable change came upon our most intimate Arab friends, which gave us much pain, for we were entirely at a loss to understand the meaning of the subtle ingenuity by which they seemed to vanish from our ken and their quietness on the rare occasions of our meeting. There seemed to be no question of offence, but just a gradual diminishing of that charming spirit of friendliness which had so immeasurably added to our happiness.

At last the morning came when the early train would bear us away from the desert and bring to an end the delightful dream-life we had been privileged

to live for so long. We had left our little parting gifts at the homes of our vanished friends the night before, with messages of farewell, and thought we should disappear "in silence and unseen." To our great joy, however, here on the station were our chief friends, full of quiet affection for us still, and evidently as sorrowful at the parting as we were.

It was Ali who put into words the ideas which had been in the Arab mind, and had found expression in actions so strange to us. With the palms of his hands down, he said, "Little by little I have withdrawn myself, so that the parting should not be so painful. You leave us here alone, and go to the great free land, *très grande, très riche*. And we, we are always sad, very sad! Our country is not our own! Good-bye! One day I will come to you in the great London. Write to me. Good-bye!"

And the small boys reported in Biskra—we heard from a friend whom we left there and have met since in England—that "Madame *cried* when the train took her away!"

We have had many letters since our return which have brought us great enjoyment. "Count me always your friend," says one, "as I count you." "You have in me a faithful and sincere friend, who will never forget you." "Your letter comes as a draught of fresh water to one who is parched with thirst in the desert, and by my word of honour and the head of my Prophet I will never forget you." With many other sentiments, expressed in the fervid poetic language of the South, in the sincerity of which we choose to place our faith.

APPENDIX

THERE arise certain questions of climate, means of travel, clothing, and costs on which I wish to add a few words to help those who may be projecting a journey to the desert.

First as to climate: I do not think Biskra (or any other desert town) is suitable for people who are actually ill. The dryness of the air is certainly a wonderful thing, the sunshine is glorious, and the thought of strong sulphur baths is an attraction; but the risk of cold winds in January and part of February must be considered; and the baths are at present so primitive and so far away as to put them out of court for a really delicate person. The lack of an English doctor, and of a modern chemist, is also a serious drawback. These remarks do not apply, however, to anyone in average health.

For those who are merely "off colour," or in want of a stimulating change, I believe no journey they could take would do so much for them. This book, I hope, has shown what inspiration and happiness one may get amongst the native folk, in a climate which is marvellously revitalising to the brain and nerves. From October to Christmas, and from the end of February to May, nothing could be more perfect. The only warning necessary applies to the first few days of a stay: always remember that there is a great contrast between the hot sunshine and the cool shade, or you will get a "desert cold," a very bad variety indeed.

In the matter of clothes, nothing out of the way is required. Woollen undergarments should always be

worn, and for the rest, clothes such as one wears for a fine summer in England. It will be of interest to ladies to know that the laundry is a very expensive item, owing to the excessive hardness of the water. Some garments which at home would cost fourpence to wash, in Biskra cost fifteenpence.

The cost of living is moderate and the food very good, considering the difficulties in the matter of supply. The water supply is excellent and reliable.

The hotels are excellent. I have said we preferred the Hotel Sahara; we liked the management, and the position opposite the gardens is, to my mind, a great attraction. The most sumptuous (and most expensive) hotel is the Palace, to which the Casino is attached. The Royale is the largest hotel, to which the greater number of tourists go; it is slightly more expensive than the Sahara, and has the advantage of a very fine flat roof and the famous minaret. In the same class with the Sahara are the Victoria, the Ziban, and the Oasis, from all of which we heard good reports. A smaller, new hotel, the Excelsior, standing in its own grounds, offers special advantages. It may be taken that terms will range from ten francs a day (for a long stay) at the majority of these houses, to twenty or twenty-five francs at the Palace.

As to the means of getting to Algeria: it should be generally known that a most useful and well-managed inquiry office in London is at the free service of the public. A letter to the manager, *Daily Mail* Travel Bureau, 130, Fleet Street, London, brings by return of post full details of routes, times, fares, hotels, etc., with personal information intelligently bearing upon each inquiry. This bureau has opened a fine new office in Paris—12, Boulevard des Capucines, which will be a great convenience to travellers.

Messrs. Thomas Cook and Son, of Ludgate Circus, London, of course, supply all travel information, and their through tickets are indispensable. Their agents

meet one at all chief points of the journey (except in Algiers itself), and their offices are found in every important city on the Continent.

In Algiers every consideration and courtesy will be found at the Universal Tourist Office, 3, Boulevard de la République, facing the harbour.

The shortest route to Biskra is by way of Dover, Calais, Paris, Marseilles, Algiers, thence by train—from twelve to eighteen hours. The cost right through is £10 11s. 2d. first-class; £7 7s. 8d. second-class. The second-class trains are quite comfortable. Many now prefer to travel from Paris to Genoa, where two lines of larger steamships are available for crossing the Mediterranean—a sea with evil tempers which belie its fair name; indeed, the Gulf of Lyons should be coupled with the Bay of Biscay. By the shortest route you may, by travelling right through, reach Biskra from London in three-and-a-half days. Going by Genoa there is the extra train journey, and the boats take some twelve hours longer; that is, Marseilles—Algiers, twenty-five hours; Genoa—Algiers, thirty-six. The cost is a little more. Personally I prefer not to venture on such a sea in any boats smaller than those going from the Italian port. If you like the sea, you may join these boats at Southampton, and reach Algiers by sea in six days.

These two lines of steamers are excellent in every way, as I know from personal experience. The Norddeutscher Lloyd boats go every fortnight from Genoa to Algiers; they are splendid vessels, capably managed, and the catering is luxurious. Through rates from London, viâ Dover, Calais, Paris, Genoa, Algiers, first-class £10 10s. 10d.; second-class (quite nice) £7 7s. 1d. The London office is Keller, Wallis and Co., 26, Cockspur Street, Charing Cross.

The other line, which is excellent in every way and somewhat cheaper, is the Nederland Royal Mail Line, of which the boats leave Southampton every alternate

Tuesday for Algiers, and leave Algiers every fortnight for Genoa. Rates: Southampton to Algiers by sea, first-class £10 10s. (it must be remembered that this includes living for a week); second-class £6 10s. The London address is H. V. Elkins, 2, Panton Street, Haymarket.

A few days may be spent very pleasurably in Algiers, where is the old Arab quarter and the beautifully-planned French city. In the town the Hôtel des Étrangers is comfortable, and moderate in its charges; if the bustle and noise of the town are objected to, I strongly recommend the charming and beautifully situated boarding-house called the Olivage, three miles up the hill at Mustapha Supérieur. It is easily reached by the electric tram, which also passes the famous Hôtel St. George, one of the most delightful and luxurious hotels anywhere to be found. Out of the town, too, is the Hôtel Beau Séjour, very moderate in its terms. The Hôtel Continentale commands a view of the glorious bay, and is away from the noise of the tram line.

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